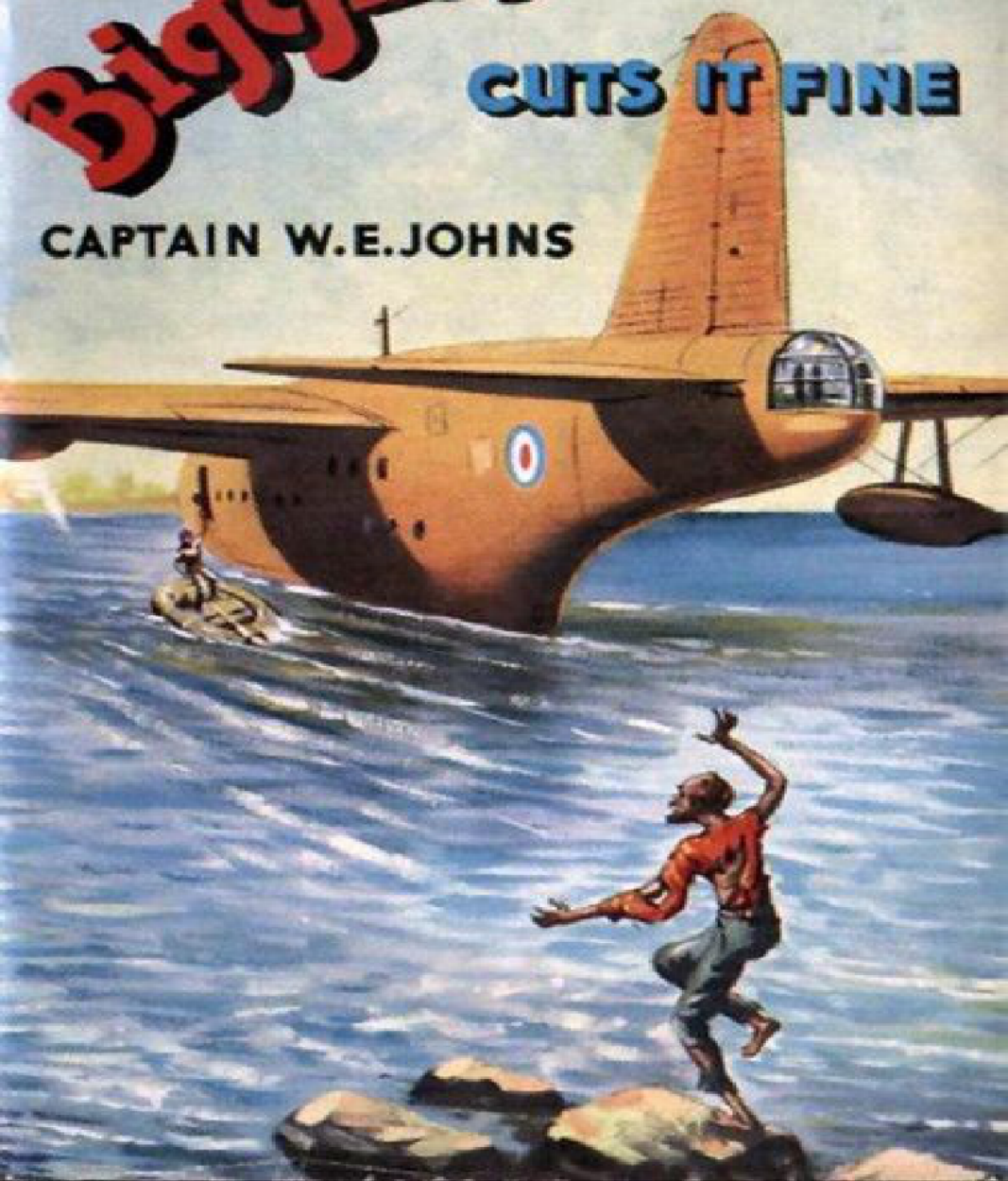


Biggles

CUTS IT FINE

CAPTAIN W.E. JOHNS



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MAINLY ABOUT ISLANDS

AIR-COMMODORE RAYMOND, Chief of the Air Section of Scotland Yard, greeted his operational staff from behind a paper-littered desk, as, in obedience to his invitation, they filed into his office.

"Pull up some chairs," he requested. "This is only in the nature of a conference, and, strangely enough, for once there's nothing urgent about it. Help yourselves to cigarettes— we may be some time." He pushed the box forward.

Biggles clicked his lighter. "I thought things were too quiet to last," he murmured, a trifle cynically perhaps.

"If nothing more, I'll give you something to occupy your minds," promised the Air-Commodore. "The business I'm going to talk about is so far no more than a question mark; but it's a biggish one, so I shall deal with it in two parts. In due course, you'll see how they fit together, in conjecture, if not in actual fact." He tapped the ash from his cigarette.

"First of all we're going to have a little chat about islands," he resumed. "I know quite a lot about them because I have spent the past week reading a mass of information compiled by the Security people from material provided by Admiralty Records. I shall ignore what we might call the popular or romantic angle. We are only concerned with an aspect which the ordinary man in the street may not have taken into consideration, even today, when all sorts of remote scraps of land are apt to jump suddenly into the headlines. Nor shall I mention the larger islands that make up most of the world. It is the little odd specks in the ocean that are more likely to give us a headache. Some of these hitherto unconsidered trifles have suddenly become treasure islands, although not in the generally accepted sense of that term. They are treasures in the fact that they exist at all. I'll come back to that point presently." The Air-Commodore's eyes turned to Biggles.

"You should know as well as anyone that the desert islands that form the background of so much enchanting fiction are not dotted about the oceans merely in the imagination of the writers. They really exist; and quite a lot of them are all that they are cracked up to be. Not all come into that category, however. The majority are anything but paradises on earth. How many there are altogether I don't know. I doubt if anyone knows. But there are certainly more than most people suppose. There are, I learn with some astonishment, about ten thousand uninhabited islands in the Indian Ocean alone. There isn't room for all of them on the map. A single dot, under a single name, may represent an archipelago of hundreds of islands, some large but mostly small. There are so many that it has obviously been difficult to find names for all of them. There are islands named after animals, birds, fruit, the names of ships

and the names of men who discovered them. There is an island for every saint in the calendar, every day of the week and every month of the year. The list is endless. Some occur in clusters of hundreds or even thousands. Some are lonely little lumps of land so far away from anywhere that they really exist only on charts. No one ever sees them. No one ever goes near them. There has never been a reason. Until recently they were utterly worthless. They were the orphans of the lonely wastes. Until now nobody had bothered about them. They were found, charted, and that was that. But because we happen to be a seafaring nation it was usually a wandering British ship, calling perhaps for fresh water, that planted the first flag; for which reason a great many of them are our property.

“The old sailing skippers sometimes did more than plant the Union Jack. Shipwreck was once more common than it is today, and with the ever present possibility of being cast away it was a common practice for ships’ captains to put stores ashore and erect a notice to direct visitors to them. Survey ships of the Royal Navy did more. They planted fruit and vegetable seeds, and introduced hens, goats, sheep and rabbits, so that a shipwrecked mariner had something to eat while he was leading a Crusoe existence. In this way many a sailor’s life has been saved, for there have been scores of castaways apart from such famous names as Alexander Selkirk, who, as you know, was the original Robinson Crusoe.” The Air-Commodore smiled apologetically. “You will see presently what this is leading up to.”

“Now then,” he went on. “Some of these islands have only been discovered within the last hundred years. Some haven’t been visited for fifty years or more, not since the old-fashioned whalers sailed unfrequented seas looking for their quarry. In some cases, such as Dougherty Island for example, the island has completely disappeared. At all events, some cannot now be found. Others appear to play hide-and-seek; here today and gone tomorrow. Thus with Falcon Island, which in 1885 was two hundred and ninety feet high. For years no one could find it. When it was rediscovered in 1927 it had shrunk to a hundred feet. Tosca, in the Indian Ocean, blew up and is no more. Krakatoa did the same thing, with a bang that was heard for three thousand miles. My reason for mentioning this is simply to demonstrate the inadvisability of trusting too much to certain islands being where they are supposed to be.”

“I’ll bear it in mind,” promised Biggles.

“Some islands are only a few feet above sea level at their highest point,” continued the Air-Commodore. “Others tower up to many thousands of feet. Some have shores so precipitous that no one has yet set foot on them. Others are so exposed to gales that a landing is only possible once or twice a year. Penguin Island, one of the Crozet group, is a sheer rock sticking up for a thousand feet. At least one island was completely forgotten—Clipperton—in the Pacific. Mexico claimed it, put a garrison ashore, and then forgot all about it. When some years later a passing ship happened to call, the wretched people had all starved to death.” The Air-Commodore drew a deep breath. “I tell you,

it isn't until you really go into this island business that you realise what an amazing affair it is. Of course, I have a reason for going into it. Don't think I'm merely trying to entertain you."

"We had occasion to think on these lines before," put in Biggles. "It resulted in us going to Kerguelen.¹"

"I remember," answered the Air-Commodore. "Kerguelen is a case in point. There you have an island eighty miles long by forty-five miles wide and not a soul on it."

Biggles shrugged. "Only a lunatic would plant himself two thousand miles from his nearest neighbour."

"Don't be too sure about that," returned the Air-Commodore significantly. "But let us proceed. Kerguelen isn't unique, except that it is larger than most uninhabited islands. Heard Island, which is British, in the same lonely ocean, is twenty-five miles long by nine miles wide. Admittedly, there's a good reason for no one living there. The centre is an active volcano, six thousand feet high, with glaciers on its slopes. As far as we know, the last time the island was seen was in 1910, when the *Wakefield* passed close when she was looking for the survivors of the ill-fated *Warratah*. Even more unattractive is Saint Paul Island, where, if you dig, the ground begins to smoke. Both Saint Paul and Amsterdam Islands are the craters of nearly extinct volcanoes.

"For sheer loneliness, though, it would be hard to beat the Crozets, which lie more than sixteen hundred miles from the nearest land, which is the Cape of Good Hope. There are several of them, including twelve small ones known as the Apostles. It is in such islands as these that we now have a particular interest, for although they are in the world's loneliest sea, they happen to lie at no great distance from the Great Circle route between South Africa and Australia."

"You're thinking of mid-ocean refuelling stations for long distance air transport," guessed Biggles.

"Yes, and no," answered the Air-Commodore. "There's an aspect even more important than that one, which, as you know, arose a few years ago, and resulted in a general scramble for islands that happened to lie on projected inter-continental air routes. Political complications arose when several nations laid claims to the same islands. However, that was all buttoned up amicably, and at islands like Canton, which happened to have a lagoon that was a ready-made seaplane base, a policy of joint occupation was agreed upon. As a matter of detail I was thinking of that particular island, and others equally well placed, when I spoke just now of treasure islands. Lying near the great trans-ocean air routes of the future, they are worth far more than all the gold and jewels ever looted by pirates. Take Swains Island. In 1856 a young man named Jennings settled there with his wife. Now his descendants, forgotten for years, spring into the news. Another case was Rose Island. In 1870 it was bought for a pound. Today it isn't for sale at any price. Of course few islands are privately owned nowadays. But the point is, all these scraps of land

scattered about the Seven Seas are now parcels of property worth having. Many are still remote, but communications like radio have telescoped the distance, as you might say.”

“Nations that have none must be feeling the draught,” observed Biggles.

“Exactly,” said the Air-Commodore meaningly. “It is possible that some of them will try to use those that belong to other people—if they can do that without being spotted. The question arises, if in fact that is being done already, how are we going to spot them?”

“Ah!” breathed Biggles. “Now I get it.”

“That is the question that has brought us together this morning,” stated the Air-Commodore. “I will now make a different approach to the same subject. It’s the crux of the matter.” He stubbed his cigarette.

“We know,” he resumed, “no matter how we know, that there was established sometime ago behind the Iron Curtain a very special school in which emphasis was placed on certain specialised subjects, such as radar, radio, long-range projectiles and the like. It was evident from the high standard demanded of the pupils that they were destined for something more important than ordinary marine work. We were unable to find out what this was. We still don’t know, but a recent development may have provided us with a pointer. At least, so think certain people whose job it is to work out these problems. Long range submarines have been putting to sea with these specially trained men on board, and sometimes coming back without them. Clearly, they have been put ashore somewhere. Where, and for what purpose, we would very much like to know. It seems unlikely that they have been taken to any continental mainland, or the more populous islands, for they could hardly hope to remain there for any length of time without their presence being discovered. It seems possible, if not probable, that they have been put where, in the event of war, they would be able to strike with telling effect across our lines of communication, against troop transports, for instance, from unsuspected hide-outs. Not only from unsuspected hide-outs but from unsinkable ones. Obviously, they would be able to do immense damage, and so disorganise the carefully prepared plans of the Western Powers. Moreover, bearing in mind the precipitous nature of certain islands, as I went to some pains to explain just now, it might be extremely difficult to dislodge a hostile force so placed.

“It’s an alarming thought, but there’s no getting away from it. A mere handful of men on, say, Marion Island, which is British, and rises sheer four thousand feet out of the sea, or Prince Edward Island, which has a fifteen mile coast of black perpendicular cliff, could make the place an impregnable fortress. These islands, and other similar ones, are all uncomfortably close to our main lines of communication. And remember, all these I have mentioned are in one section of the globe. I’m not suggesting that aircraft could operate from all these places, but we are living in an age of weird and wonderful missiles.”

“It doesn’t need much room to catapult an aircraft,” said Biggles thoughtfully. “And a machine needn’t necessarily return to its base. Having done its work it could make for the nearest mainland.”

“Just so. Nor does it need much room to operate a radar or radio station in contact with prowling long-range submarines.” The Air-Commodore sat back and put his fingers together. “You see the size of the proposition with which we’re faced.”

“So far I don’t think you’ve mentioned an actual proposition,” said Biggles evenly.

“Obviously, those responsible for the defence of the Western Union are not likely to sleep comfortably in their beds while this potential threat is hanging over them. They want to satisfy themselves that their fears are groundless—or otherwise.”

“What you mean is, it is proposed to search these islands to see if any unwelcome tenants have taken up residence.”

“Yes. We daren’t just let the matter slide and hope for the best. Once trouble started, which heaven forbid, it would be too late to do anything.”

“But this, surely, is a job for the Jolly Jack Tars,” said Biggles.

“It would be if the Navy had a few hundred more ships and could spare them for such a purpose. Think of the time that would be required. Even with a big fleet it would take years to examine every island on the danger list.”

“It would take aircraft some time, too, if that’s the bright idea,” declared Biggles.

“Aircraft are still a lot faster than the fastest marine craft capable of undertaking such a job. It isn’t suggested that aircraft reconnoitre every island in every ocean,” explained the Air-Commodore quickly. “That would be almost impossible. A suggestion was put forward that, in the first place, the islands most strategically placed should be given the once over. By which I mean those most likely to be of use to a potential enemy, such as the islands in the South Indian Ocean that I’ve mentioned. If these yielded nothing of a suspicious nature it would at least allay anxiety and give reason to hope that our fears were groundless. On the other hand, if something sinister was discovered on one of the islands, every available ship and aircraft would have to embark on the major operation of checking up on the rest; for if one enemy base was established we should have to assume that there were others. In other words, at this juncture we are proposing no more than a preliminary survey, concentrating on those islands that are, I admit, the most remote, and for that reason most likely to be fortified secretly by our enemies.”

“Tell me this,” requested Biggles. “What do the people behind this scheme think that an aircraft can do? They’re not expecting anyone to land on a glacier, an active volcano, or even a lump of rock thousands of miles from anywhere—I hope?”

“No.”

“Then what, apart from speed, is the advantage of an aircraft over a ship?”

"This," countered the Air-Commodore. "A ship approaching an enemy base such as we visualise would be seen a long way off, thus giving the garrison plenty of time to cover everything up. You may be sure that protective camouflage would be available. On the other hand, an aircraft arriving suddenly and unexpectedly might catch them on one foot, so to speak. One wouldn't expect to see a gun emplacement or anything of that nature, but there might be other signs, such as the smoke of a cooking fire, for example. A further argument is, a ship can only see one section of land at a time, and that from ground level. An aircraft, flying high, has a comprehensive view of the whole thing. It can take and bring back photographic records to be studied at leisure by experts who are up to all the tricks of camouflage. None of these islands has ever been photographed from the air. It's time they were. In fact, I doubt if an aircraft has ever been within sight of them."

Biggles took a cigarette and tapped it thoughtfully on the table. "This looks like being the biggest game of hunt-the-thimble so far devised by a world that is fast going round the bend," he remarked.

"Can you think of an alternative?"

"Neither can anyone else, for the simple reason that there isn't one."

"I agree with every word you say," assented Biggles. "It doesn't need much imagination to see the risks these islands represent. Tell me, is there any actual evidence to support these suspicions?"

"Not a thing, apart from the training of these mystery men who are obviously being put ashore somewhere. We are fortunate in a way that none of the Iron Curtain countries possess islands in a position to worry us. The Western Powers own practically all of them, so the question of territorial rights doesn't arise."

Biggles smiled mirthlessly. "A fat lot of difference that would make if one happened to bump into an enemy force on our property, or an island belonging to any of the Western Powers. It would be a case of dead men tell no tales."

"Well, that's the position," stated the Air-Commodore with an air of resignation. "The situation as I have described it has been sprung on us out of the blue. Perhaps we are to blame for not taking steps earlier to safeguard our property; but with Korea, Malaya, Africa and the rest, we have enough on our plate without maintaining military units on every scrap of land between the North Pole and the South."

Biggles nodded. "True enough. Well, what do you want me to do?"

"There's no particular hurry about anything. It struck me that while things are quiet you might have a look round and check up on some of these odd scraps of land likely to be more of a curse than a blessing. Handle the thing your own way. The Admiralty are willing to base a frigate here and there in case there was trouble of any sort."

"That's kind of them, considering what we're doing is really their job,"

answered Biggles sarcastically, getting up and walking over to the big map of the world that covered one wall of the office.

“I gather you’re not keen on the job?”

“You wouldn’t expect any man in his right mind to be wildly enthusiastic at the idea of flying over thousands of miles of salt water with no rescue service available. There’s still such a thing as structural failure and even the best engines do occasionally pack up.”

“You should be able to organise a rescue service of your own. You’ve done it before.”

“I know, but that doesn’t mean I take kindly to the idea of wagering somebody else’s life, apart from my own, against a piece of machinery functioning properly for umpteen hours on end. I like to have something solid within striking distance. Incidentally, I notice several of these islands—the Crozets for instance—are French.”

“Quite right.”

“Do our neighbours across the Ditch know anything about this scheme?”

“No.”

“I think they should. We should look silly if they jumped on us for trespassing, as they would have every right. With the Cold War keeping everyone’s nerves on the jump, it’s easier to land on the wrong side of a prison wall than it is to get out again.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Both as a matter of courtesy to an ally, and efficiency in the operation, I’d like to invite Marcel Brissac, of the French Air Security Police, to come with us. Even if he declined he would at least know what was cooking in the event of questions being asked.”

“I see no objection to that.”

“Fair enough.” Biggles came back to the desk. “Is that all?”

“All for the moment.”

“Right you are, sir. I’ll go and bury myself in maps, charts, Pilot Books and Sailing Directions, to see how the thing looks when we get down to actual figures.”

“We’ll have another talk when you’ve digested what I’ve told you.”

Biggles smiled wanly. “And that’s enough to give any pilot indigestion. However, we’ll see what we can do about it. Come on, chaps.”

¹ See *Biggles’ Second Case*.

A ROVING COMMISSION

THE weeks following the conference in the Air-Commodore's office were some of the most tedious ever for those taking part in the operation. Biggles did not say so, but the others did, with increasing frankness as time wore on.

To Ginger it became a period of what he described as sheer drudgery, aviation brought to a state of such weary monotony that he could not have imagined. It would, he asserted, have been miserable enough had it produced any result; but for all they achieved they might as well have stayed at home. He prayed that something new, requiring investigation, might arise, to give them a respite from their long and fruitless hours in the cockpit over bleak, desolate seas, looking for scraps of land in the pitiless distances south of the fortieth parallel. Flying often through fog, bitter cold, and once in a howling blizzard, the long sorties were a matter of physical endurance, while the ever present possibility of engine failure, with its inevitable consequences if the sea was rough, had the usual irritating effect on the nerves.

Based mostly in South Africa, but for a little while in Western Australia, using marine aircraft fitted with special long range tanks, they had flown out day after day over grey seas, the surface of which was broken only by an occasional whaler or iceberg, looking for the islands that the Air-Commodore had named, islands which, Bertie swore, had been created for no other purpose than to wreck good ships. They had learned of the appalling record of shipwrecks in the region from books made available by the Hydrographic Office. The graveyard of ships seemed an apt description after they had read of the loss of vessels like the *Strathmore*, *Adventure* and *Prince of Wales*.

To narrate in detail the many flights made would be wearisome repetition. Sometimes they failed to find the objective island. More than once they went miles off their course to survey what turned out to be a mass of black ice that had broken away from the continent of Antarctica, far to the south. These great bergs, Biggles suspected, were the "lost" islands reported by mariners from time to time.

They had made actual landings on only three occasions. For the most part the weather, or the state of the sea, would have made any such project suicidal. The first was at the French island of St. Paul, at the request of Marcel Brissac. Some Breton fishermen had proposed to establish a lobster cannery there, he said. The island, as they were aware, was the crater of an extinct volcano, with part of the rim broken down to form a natural harbour of smooth water. They found the site of the cannery, a corrugated iron hut and some pathetic-looking graves, but of the pioneers there was no sign. Biggles did not stay long. The crater was too deep for an anchorage. Moreover, it was full of enormous fish, some of which took more interest in the aircraft than

was good for his peace of mind.

The second landing was a risky one. Flying low over Amsterdam Island there was a moment of excitement when they had seen a flag fluttering in the wind. It turned out to be the rags of a shirt fastened to an oar planted in the ground. What wretched castaway had put it there remained a mystery, for he couldn't be found. The rusty bones of a ship, which they supposed to be the *Meridian*, knowing it to have been wrecked there, did nothing to dispel an atmosphere of tragic melancholy.

The third landing was at Kerguelen, which they had cause to remember. They spent a night there in order to complete a photographic survey for Marcel. They saw no signs of human occupation.

Heard Island they found in eruption, so they wasted no time on it. On Prince Edward Island, or its neighbour, Marion Island, both British, they could see nothing. None of these islands could boast of a beach. Black perpendicular cliffs, rising sheer for thousands of feet and deeply eroded by the sea, presented a forbidding picture.

Twice they had looked for the notorious Crozets, but each time they had found the area shrouded in fog and had to return home without having made their landfall. As some of these rocks reared themselves five thousand feet out of the sea Biggles took no chances by flying low to look for them.

In a word, the whole business was, as Bertie put it, getting more than a bit of a bind. Biggles could only agree, and promised that as soon as they had seen the Crozets he would return home and make a negative report. As the Crozets were the largest group, he did not feel inclined to go home without at least having a look at them. But from the way he said this it was clear that he, like the others, had reached the stage of no longer expecting to find anything. The awful desolation of these islands was no doubt largely responsible for this attitude. Ginger remarked that it was hard to believe that anyone in his right mind would volunteer for service in conditions that were nothing less than a living death; to which Biggles replied, dryly, that some countries did not call for volunteers. Men went where they were sent—or else...

After waiting for some days for a promise of better weather they took off in two machines for what they supposed would be their final sortie. This employment of two machines flying in consort had from the start been a routine procedure. Its purpose was obvious. If one was forced down for any reason, the other, given reasonable conditions, would land to pick up the crew, either from the aircraft itself or from the dinghy carried for such an emergency. If landing was out of the question, the surviving machine would at least know where its fellow was, and what had happened. It was realised that this might well turn out to be cold comfort, but it was better than none at all, and provided a certain amount of moral support for both crews. Actually, there was little risk of a forced landing. The machines were four-engined Sunderlands made available by the R.A.F. Even with a war load they were efficient with one engine out of action. Lightly loaded as they were for the

operation, tests had shown that they could hold their altitude on two engines, no small relief for those flying them over seas where, in the event of a forced landing, the chances of being picked up were practically nil. As a matter of detail, it was agreed before the outset that the Sunderland was a big machine for the job, larger than was actually necessary, but there was nothing else available giving the required range.

In all the flights made in the course of the operation in the South Indian Ocean only two vessels were seen outside the usual course of coasters and similar small craft. One was a tramp heading east along the forty-fifth parallel, apparently on the five thousand odd mile run from the Cape to South Australia or Tasmania. The other, farther south, was taken to be a whaler, since no other vessel was likely to have business in that area of the globe.

Biggles flew one machine with Ginger as second pilot and navigator. Algy had charge of the other, with Bertie and Marcel Brissac for crew. Marcel, it should be said, had accepted Biggles' invitation to accompany the expedition, to watch French interests.

The weather remained clear and the Crozets were spotted from a great way off. Following the method suggested by the Air-Commodore, Biggles flying at fifteen thousand feet, throttled back a little to reduce noise and put his nose down for a fast run in, with the object of catching intruders off guard, should any be there.

The islands grew larger and harder in outline as the two Sunderlands, flying together, closed the gap. Ginger, watching, turned over in his mind all the information they had gathered about them before starting.

This was not very much, for since they were discovered in 1772 by the French navigator Marion de Fresne, who was subsequently killed by natives in New Zealand, the number of ships that had called could be counted on the fingers; and these were almost all the old-fashioned whalers in search of seals or king penguins which they boiled down for oil, practically exterminating the harmless creatures in the process. As far as was known, the last time a steamer had passed close was in 1901. It saw no sign of life.¹

Ginger could pick them all out. Possession, the largest; Hog; Penguin, a sheer rock rising a thousand feet that had never been landed on; East, a volcanic mountain top with curious jagged peaks rising to five thousand feet; and the Twelve Apostles, comprising two islands with ten pinnacle rocks near by. Hog Island had got its name in a curious way. Hogs put ashore by a Captain Distance in 1834 had completely overrun the island; yet when a Captain Nares had called in 1874 there was not one left. The mystery was soon solved. Rabbits had starved them all to death by consuming the entire food supply. How the rabbits had got there was not known.²

There was supposed to be a food depot on Possession Island, established to support shipwrecked sailors, of which the islands had an unenviable record. The survivors of the *Strathmore* had spent seven months there before they were picked up by a whaler that had chanced to pass within sight of the group.

The crew of the sealing ship *Adventure* had waited for eighteen months before being rescued. The survivors of the *Prince of Wales* had endured a miserable existence on a diet of walrus and seagulls' eggs for two years before being picked up.

As Ginger got a better view of the scene of these depressing experiences he prayed fervently that he would not become a modern Crusoe. Robinson of that name had been lucky, he decided, for he had at least a beach to walk on. As in the case of the islands already visited there wasn't a single beach in the entire Crozet group.

Staring down at the harsh, treeless surface of Possession as they cruised over it, losing height, Ginger's eyes detected a faint wisp of something that he thought looked more like smoke than mist. "Is that smoke down there?" he called sharply.

"It looks like smoke to me," answered Biggles, turning towards the point of interest. "These islands are all volcanic," he reminded, as if offering a possible explanation.

But the matter was not long in doubt. A solitary figure could be seen scrambling over the rocks towards the spot. Apparently it carried something of an inflammable nature, for a minute later a definite column of smoke rolled up.

"There's somebody there, anyway," said Biggles.

"What will you do?"

"We shall have to see about getting down. Make a signal to Algy and tell him to stand by while we investigate."

Ginger went through to the radio compartment.

When he returned to the control cabin Biggles was flying low along the lee side of the island. There was still no sign of anything resembling a beach although there were places where the eternal onslaught of the sea appeared to have undermined the cliffs and brought them crashing down in tremendous screes of black basaltic detritus. There were some indentations in the coast line, but nothing in the way of a sheltered anchorage. However, here the sea was definitely smoother than on the side from which they had approached, where the waves were foaming against the rocks. Even so, although the water was comparatively calm for the region, there was still a certain amount of swell that Ginger eyed with askance.

"What are you going to do?" he asked anxiously, looking at Biggles' face for an indication of his intention. "I'm going down," answered Biggles.

"It doesn't look too good to me."

"Nor me. But what else can we do. Put yourself in the position of that wretched fellow stranded here. At least, I don't see how he can be anything but a castaway. How would you feel if you saw salvation in sight, only to have your hopes dashed when your signals were ignored?"

"I should jump straight into the drink and drown myself," confessed Ginger frankly.

“Precisely. That’s why we’ve got to take a chance on getting down.”

Nothing more was said.

Biggles flew a little way along the frowning flank of the island, turned into the wind, throttled back, and losing height gently, made what Ginger supposed would be a trial run.

That may have been Biggles’ original intention, but if so he must have changed his mind, for suddenly he said: “Hold tight! We may bump a bit.” By the time Ginger had braced himself the keel struck the water with a resounding smack that enveloped the machine in a cloud of spray.

Another moment or two and it was riding a long sullen swell which, while not steep enough to be dangerous, left Ginger in doubt as to the position of his stomach.

“If you stay here I shall be sick,” he gulped, as the aircraft slid into a trough.

“I’ve no intention of staying here,” returned Biggles, and using his engines cautiously took the machine closer in, to an area of comparative calm behind a mass of fallen rock that formed a natural breakwater.

“That’s better,” said Ginger. “Now what?”

“We’ll wait for the fellow to come to us. He won’t be long, I imagine.”

“You’re not going ashore?”

“Not unless it’s unavoidable. This is no place to dally. I doubt if we should find bottom with an anchor and I don’t feel inclined to take a chance on buckling a wing tip by making fast to those rocks.”

“Then how are you going to get this chap on board?”

“We shall have to use the dinghy. Unless there’s more current than there appears you should be able to manage single-handed.” Biggles smiled. “If I’m wrong I can always pick you up.”

“Thank you,” acknowledged Ginger, with biting sarcasm.

By the time the cumbersome dinghy was on the water he could see a wild, ragged, bearded figure, leaping from rock to rock towards them. “If he breaks his neck after all our trouble I shall say something,” he remarked.

“If you’d been stuck here for any length of time with only seals for company, *you’d* be in a hurry to get off,” declared Biggles grimly. “Get going.”

Ginger picked up the paddle. The aircraft had drifted to within thirty yards of the nearest point of rock, so no great feat of seamanship was required to reach it. Clinging to it, he saw the scarecrow figure approaching, wild-eyed and whooping like a maniac. Indeed, Ginger’s expression changed when the thought occurred to him that the man might indeed be crazy. “Take it easy!” he shouted.

The man made no reply, but reaching the last rock, took a flying leap into the dinghy that might well have capsized it. Ginger nearly went overboard. “Sit down and sit still, you fool!” he shouted furiously.

“Ah... Ah...” panted the man, who was obviously in a state of nervous

exhaustion.

“Ask him if he’s alone,” shouted Biggles from the machine.

Ginger put the question.

“Yus, I’m the lot,” answered the castaway, speaking with an unmistakable cockney twang.

Ginger sent the dinghy forging back to where Biggles was standing by the cabin door to help them aboard.

“Make it snappy,” called Biggles. “I’m drifting too close to these rocks for my liking.”

The castaway scrambled aboard. Ginger followed. Getting to his feet he saw the rescued man sitting on the floor with his hands over his face.

“Snap out of it and answer my questions quickly,” ordered Biggles. “Are you sure there’s no one else on the island?”

The man looked up, and for the first time Ginger was really able to see what a state he was in. Emaciated and hollow-eyed, a tangle of hair and beard so covered his face that it was impossible to judge his age. “I was here on me lonesome, guvnor,” he said shakily.

“How long have you been here?”

“I dunno, mister. I’ve lost count. Some of my lot might’ve got ashore on the next island. I ain’t bin there to see. There’s a fair anchorage there.”

“How do you know that if you haven’t been there?” asked Biggles sharply.

“A bloke told me.”

“What bloke?”

“Willy. He was a Jerry—you know, German. He died on me, poor little blighter. I buried ‘im.”

Biggles looked at Ginger. “I daren’t stay talking here. Give him a drink from the Thermos, and some biscuits, to go on with. I’m going over to look at Hog Island. As soon as we’re off, tell Algy to follow us.” He hurried through to the cockpit.

The take-off was a hair-raising affair, with Ginger and his companion lying flat on the floor while the aircraft bounded in a cloud of spray before unsticking. As soon as the machine was airborne, Ginger fetched a Thermos and biscuits, and then, going to the radio compartment, gave Algy the message. By the time he had done this and joined Biggles in the cockpit they were flying low over Hog Island.

Biggles made two uneventful circuits, flying low, whereupon, as nothing of interest was seen, he nosed down to what proved to be a comfortable mooring, presumably the anchorage mentioned by the castaway.

“We’ll stay here to hear what this fellow has to say,” he told Ginger.

“It’s no use returning to base only to find that we have to come back. Moreover, this weather is exceptional. It may not last. We might have to wait a month for another chance like this to complete the survey. If this chap we’ve picked up was one of a ship’s company, and he must have been, his shipmates may be about. We’ll see while we’re here. Tell Algy to come down.”

“Okay,” acknowledged Ginger.

Ten minutes later the two machines, side by side, were floating close inshore on the calm black water of Deliverance Bay, Hog Island.

¹ The Crozets were named after the historian of de Fresne’s expedition.

² This incident, while strange, is not unique in the history of islands. On one of the Society Group, some rats got ashore from a trading vessel. Having no natural enemies, they multiplied at phenomenal speed and overran the island. The planter who lived there, faced with ruin, imported some cats. These, too, increased at a fantastic rate while the food supply—the rats—lasted. When the last rat had been eaten, the cats, faced with starvation, set about each other and so exterminated themselves. A few survivors saved themselves by learning how to catch fish. They have remained fish eaters to this day.

ALF ROBINSON

THE castaway was given a little while to eat the best meal the aircraft could provide, and at the same time recover from the shock of his rescue, which had left him somewhat shaken and inclined to be incoherent, as was understandable. Apart from that, strange to relate, he seemed fit enough, although emaciated by semi-starvation and nervous from long solitude. The crew of the second machine launched their dinghy and came over to see him. They stayed on to hear his story, and took the opportunity to have their “elevenses “ in a stationary aircraft.

When Biggles thought that the new member of the party had had enough to eat for the time being, and was in a fit state to talk, he invited him to tell his tale, which, except in one respect, turned out to be a typical castaway misadventure.

The man, somewhat unnecessarily, began by saying that he was English. His name, appropriately enough, was Robinson—Alf Robinson. Which made them all smile. His home was at Wapping. He had always wanted to be a sailor ever since, as a kid, he had played round the Port of London. He was eighteen years old, and this, the voyage that had ended in disaster, was his first. It would also, he assured his hearers, be his last. He had seen enough of the sea to last a lifetime, he declared with some warmth—a sentiment which Ginger could well appreciate.

He had shipped as a deck hand on a tramp named the *Kittiwake*, 1,400 tons, Captain Legett, master, out from the Port of London to Cape Town with a cargo of machinery. Failing to find freight in South Africa for London, the Captain had accepted mixed cargo for Hobart, Tasmania, hoping there to pick up a consignment of wool for the United Kingdom. The date was some time in January, from which it was worked out that Robinson had been on Possession Island for eleven months.

Six days out from the Cape, the ship, which Robinson described as an old tub, had developed engine trouble—not for the first time. The Captain had not asked for help because the Chief Engineer thought he could put the trouble right, which in fact he did, although by that time they were rolling in dirty weather.

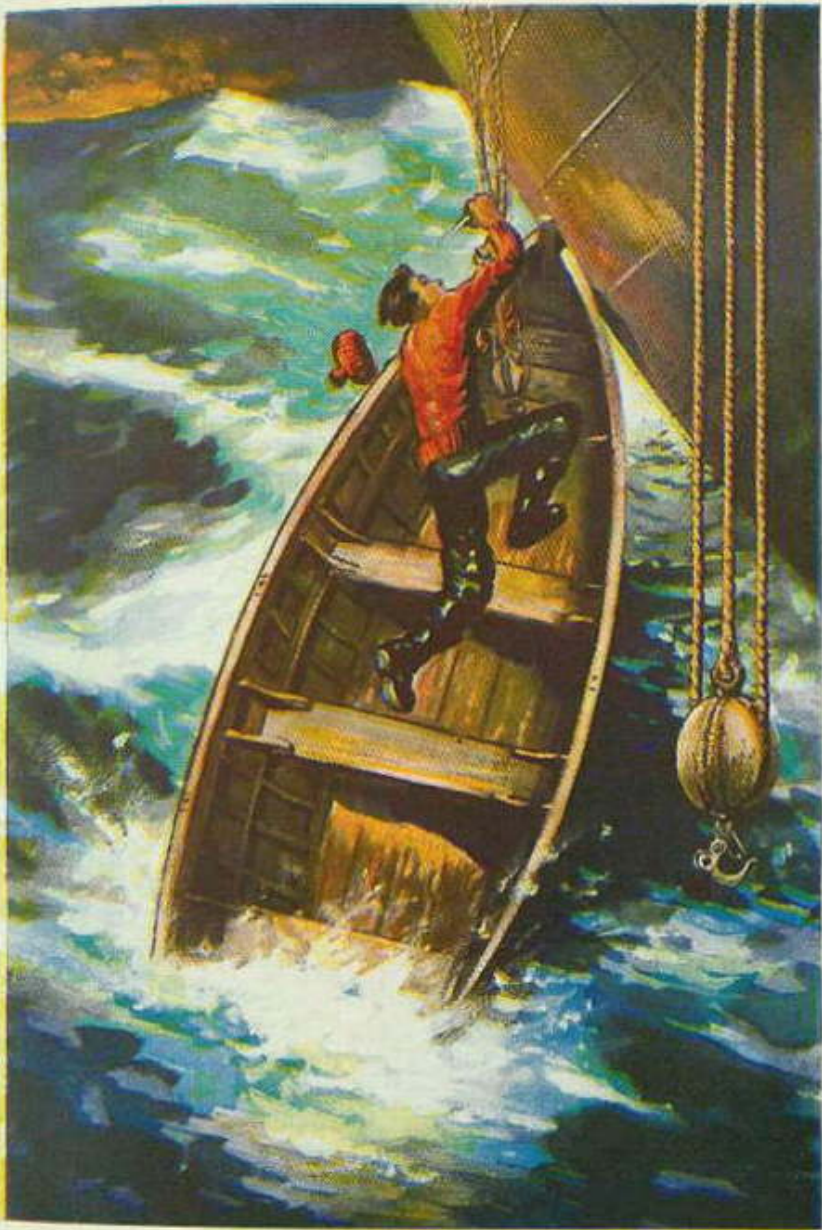
The sailor admitted that he didn’t really know what happened after that, although he remembered hearing someone say that they had drifted south while the engines were out of action. “We were in fog most of the time, so I reckon no one didn’t know where we were,” he opined.

All that he knew for certain was, that about midnight, just as he had gone below, there was a horrible scraping sort of crash. He was thrown over, and by the time he had picked himself up, he was up to the neck in water. By the

time he had reached the deck the ship was on her beam ends and settling fast. It was pitch dark, foggy and bitterly cold. "I reckon the poor old *Kittiwake* must've tore her bottom clean off on a lump of ice," surmised Robinson sadly.

It was impossible to see what was happening, he resumed. He could hear the skipper shouting every man for himself. He didn't think any boats got away; there wasn't time.

He found his own hanging by the stern, the falls having apparently jammed. The bows were already in the water, the ship was so far down. He slashed the ropes with his knife and by wonderful luck the boat landed on the water the right way up. "Lucky ! Not arf I wasn't," declared Robinson. "You see," he added naively, "I can't swim a blooming stroke."



"Lucky! Not 'arf I wasn't," declared Robinson. "You see,"
he added naively, "I can't swim a blooming stroke."
(See page 35)

Sitting in the boat he saw the ship disappear.

That was all he knew about the wreck. For a little while he could hear men shouting. Whether they were in boats or in the water he didn't know. There was nothing he could do, for when he felt for the oars they weren't there.

“Must’ve dropped out when the boat got up-ended,” he conjectured. “So there I sits, out on the rollin’ deep, all on my blinkin’ lonesome, wonderin’ what’s goin’ to ‘appen next. Blimey! What a night! Cold? I was fair perished. I shan’t forget it in a ‘urry, I can tell yer.”

“I’ll bet you won’t, laddie,” murmured Bertie sympathetically.

Robinson said he sat in the boat with nothing to do but bale and stare at the sea for three days and nights. On the third night the boat bumped into something solid. At first he thought it was an iceberg. Whatever it was knocked a hole in the bottom of his boat which began to sink, so he scrambled out to find himself on a rock. Not until daylight came did he know how big it was. Then he discovered that he was sitting on a ledge at the bottom of a cliff, with no way to the top unless he climbed up the face. How he did this he didn’t know. He thought he might as well fall and die quickly as sit where he was and die slowly. Somehow he got to the top, and after that it didn’t take him long to discover that he was on a fair-sized island, the coldest, wettest, ugliest island he had ever seen.

Still, it was better than an iceberg. But, he averred, he nearly died when he saw the sort of place he’d got stuck on.

Walking about to keep himself warm, and hoping to see some of his shipmates who might have made the same landfall, he discovered a notice board on which had been painted the wonderful words: “Food Depot in Cave One Mile East. Cairn marks Spot. H.M.S. *Pelican*, 1899. It give me new ‘eart,” asserted the castaway. “Good old *Pelican*, sez I. They ought t’ ‘ave named yer Santa Claus. Off I goes in a ‘urry, for I don’t mind tellin’ yer I was pretty peckish by this time. And there, lo and be’old is a big pile of stones in front of a cave. Some of the grub was pretty rotten, as you’d expect after all that time; but ‘oo was I to be particuler ? There was paraffin, matches, fish ‘ooks and lines, medicines with labels sayin’ what they was for, all done up careful in sealed tins. Best of all there was some fags and tobacco. This is a bit of all right, I sez. Good old Navy. Trust them! Wot ‘it me ‘ardest was bein’ on me own, and thinkin’ of me shipmates. From the top of the island I could see others, so I ‘oped that they might’ve got ashore on one of ‘em. Mind yer, wot with collecting driftwood for fires, and fishin’, and watchin’ fer ships, I had plenty to keep me busy. I lived in the cave, of course, so I could keep an eye on my stores. The nights were the worst part. Lumme! I used to think they’d never end.”

Those listening to this recital found the story entertaining, but nothing more. What was to come, although they had no reason to suspect it, was far more interesting, and they listened all ears, as the saying is, as Robinson continued.

He said he reckoned he’d been on the island four or five months, as near as he could guess, when, one fair morning, at daybreak, making his usual survey of the ocean, which was always his first job, he saw, to his unspeakable joy, a ship—or rather a submarine—standing close in, off a distant point of the

island. Fearing it might leave before he could get to it, he rushed up the hill on which he had built a bonfire for such an occasion. But his frantic haste was his undoing, for in jumping over the rocks he slipped and fell, striking his head and knocking himself unconscious. At the same time, although being unconscious he didn't know it, he broke or sprained his ankle—he wasn't sure which.

How long he lay where he had fallen he didn't know. He never did know. But it must have been a fair time, for when he came round it was dark, and he was so stiff with cold that he could hardly move. It was when he tried to do so that he discovered the injury to his ankle. He described in some detail his anguish as he lay there, sick and helpless, waiting for morning, wondering if the submarine was still there or if it had gone. When daylight came at last and there was no sign of it, he admitted that he lay there and “cried like a kid.”

With a great effort and in terrible pain he managed to get to his cave, and there he lay—he didn't know how long—until he was well enough to hobble about, using two pieces of driftwood for crutches. He was doing this when, looking down, he saw, to his amazement, a man sitting on the rocks, staring at the sea. He shouted. The man saw him and came up. It took him some time because, as it turned out, he was also on the sick list.

This was how Robinson had met Willy. Robinson fell silent at the recollection of this strange meeting.

“And who exactly was Willy?” asked Biggles, trying not to reveal his impatience.

“He was a Jerry, a real German, but he could talk English all right,” explained the castaway. “He was a good sort, too. He was dying with consumption, and he knew it, which made me feel I hadn't much to grumble at after all. Poor old Willy. I did what I could for him but it was no use. He lived about six weeks. Then he died. I couldn't dig much of a 'ole to bury 'im in, but I piled plenty of rocks on top to stop the gulls from gettin' at 'im. The big 'uns, what they call albatrosses, are fair devils. They'd eat you alive if they thought they could get away with it. At one time I thought Willy seemed a little better; but no; it didn't last. Then I saw he was a gonna. Died like a good 'un, too, 'e did. I said all the prayers over 'im that I could remember.” Robinson's eyes grew misty at the memory.

“Who was he?” pressed Biggles.

A hard note crept into Robinson's voice. “You won't believe this, but it's a fact. 'Is shipmates put 'im ashore and left 'im to die.”

Ginger stared, incredulously. “Oh no—!”

Robinson threw out a hand. “There you are, I told you you wouldn't believe me!”

Biggles stepped in. “Why did they do that?”

“Well, yer see, it was like this 'ere. Willy was one of the crew of the sub, and as it 'ad a long way to go, they thought if they kept 'im aboard, they might all catch the disease off 'im. That's what 'e told me. They left 'im some

grub.”

“That was very kind of them,” said Biggles, caustically.

“They said they’d be back for ‘im later on when ‘e was better; but of course, Willy knew better than that.”

“Do I understand that this was a German submarine?” asked Biggles.

“Oh no. Not likely,” denied Robinson. “Willy said Germans wouldn’t do a thing like that. It was a Russian.”

“I see,” said Biggles slowly, his eyes on the sailor’s face. “How did he come to be aboard a Russian craft?”

“That’s the first thing I asked ‘im,” stated Robinson. “‘E told me. He’d ‘ave told me anything, he was that sore about the way they’d treated him. It seems he was in that part of Germany what the Russkys ‘ave collared. During the war, ‘e served in Hitler’s U-boats, so there was nothing ‘e didn’t know about subs. The Russians must have found that out, because they went to ‘im and offered ‘im a job—good pay it was, too, he said. Being out of work ‘e took on, naturally. So presently he found ‘imself in one of their biggest and latest subs; able to stay under water six months if it wanted to. This was the one I saw, of course. We talked about it for hours. There wasn’t much else to talk about.”

“Did he tell you what the submarine was doing?” inquired Biggles.

“‘E told me as much as ‘e knew ‘imself. It was supposed to be all very secret, but Willy didn’t care, ‘e was that fed up. I reckon the Bolshies would ‘ave thought twice about dumping ‘im ashore if they’d known I was there. Thinking about it after Willy died, it seemed I might ‘ave been lucky after all, missing the boat like I did.”

“I’d say you were very lucky indeed,” said Biggles seriously. “Carry on.”

“Well, at first things weren’t too bad, Willy said. They stopped at two or three islands and had a look at ‘em. Then they went to the bottom of South America and ‘ad a look there. That was pretty awful, ‘e said. There was thousands of islands, some with mountains covered with snow. It was cold and raining all the time. They ended up at a place where a German cruiser ‘id in the Kaiser’s war, after the Battle of the Falklands. Willy ‘eard them talkin’ about it. ‘E often ‘eard the officers talking, but he couldn’t always get what it was about. ‘E was the only German aboard, so most of the talk was in Russian, which he didn’t understand, apart from orders. All he knew about it was, some people who were aboard were not part of the sub’s regular crew. They were the ones who always seemed to go ashore. ‘E couldn’t make out what they were doing, but they seemed to do a lot of measurin’. Between you and me, Willy worked out there was somethin’ fishy about it. For one thing, every time they picked up a radio signal from another ship they used to sit on the bottom till it had gone. It was when they were there Willy first started to feel queer. He told me ‘e didn’t say anythin’ about it at the time, thinking ‘e’d be able to last out until ‘e got home. Home? What a ‘ope ‘e’d got. One day along comes a Russian whaler what must ‘ave known they was there. She fills

up the sub's tanks, and off the sub goes again, this time for the islands where you found me. From what Willy said it was this very island we're on now."

"Hog Island."

"He didn't know the name. Nor did I if it comes to that. Anyway, it was while they were 'ere that the doctor on board sees Willy coughing and spittin'. 'E makes 'im undress, and after he'd 'ad a look at 'im, 'e told 'im 'e was pretty sick. Poor old Willy gets pushed into the sick berth and there he 'as to stay. It must've been then that they decided to get rid of 'im, for presently 'e's told that 'e's goin' to be put ashore for fear of them all catching the same disease, being cooped up together in a glorified tin can. Of course, they didn't tell 'im as blunt as that. What they said was, it was bad for 'im to be cooped up without fresh air. But Willy was no fool. He twigged they didn't want 'im. He was no more use to them, so they didn't care what 'appened to 'im as long as 'e didn't get ashore somewhere and talk about what 'e'd seen. So they puts 'im ashore and away goes the sub. There was nothin' Willy could do about it. He's just sittin' there waiting to die when I spots 'im. 'Ow about that for a trick to play on a shipmate? I asks yer."

"It doesn't bear thinking about," said Biggles.

"As I say, the skipper tells Willy that 'e'll come back for 'im later on. That was all my eye and Betty Martin. Willy knew 'e hadn't a 'ope. What a place to end up! It would've been kinder to shoot 'im." Robinson sighed. "Poor old Willy. 'E was a good sort. I'm glad I was there at the finish to keep 'im company."

"You haven't seen the submarine since?"

"No. And I didn't reckon to," answered Robinson.

"Tell me this," requested Biggles. "Did Willy happen to say if any of these people in the submarine had been left ashore anywhere—I mean, apart from himself?"

"He didn't mention it. If it 'appened after he fell sick I reckon 'e wouldn't know, because, accordin' to what 'e told me, he was kept in quarantine, in the sick bay. 'E wouldn't see much from there."

"That's true," agreed Biggles.

Ginger stepped in. "What I don't understand is this. Why didn't they leave him here on Hog Island? Why take him over to Possession?"

Robinson shook his head. "You've got me there, mate. Funny, I never thought of that."

"They had a reason, you may be sure of that," said Biggles. He looked at his watch. "But that's enough for now. We'll see about getting back."

"And then what?" asked Ginger.

Biggles hesitated. "I don't know—yet. I may have to dash back to London to tell the chief about this. There's too much to put in a written report. Besides, that would take time. I don't feel like going any further on my own responsibility, particularly as islands belonging to other people come into the picture. But we'll talk about this later on, when we've had time to think about

it. Alf, here, must be panting to get back to Wapping. He's overdue to renew acquaintance with a razor and a pair of scissors."

Alf smiled sheepishly. "You get a bit careless about yerself in a place like this," he explained. "What I could do with more than anythin', if you was to ask me, is a slice or two of roast beef or a steak pudding like mother used to make. Boiled penguin is all right for a bit, but lumme, you don't 'alf get sick of it."

Ginger had no difficulty in believing this.

LEAVE IT TO BIGGLESWORTH

ON the afternoon of the third day following the events narrated in the previous chapter, Biggles walked into his chief's office at Scotland Yard to find the Air-Commodore waiting, having been advised by cable of the probable time of his arrival.

Biggles had, in fact, resolved on his course of action during the return flight from Hog Island to the Cape. Before doing anything else, he decided, he would have to put the Air-Commodore in possession of information which, through the odd chance of picking up the castaway, had been brought to his notice. This practically confirmed what had been suspected, and the situation that had developed, or threatened to develop, was too serious for him to handle on his own initiative.

Finding that a B.O.A.C. Comet was due to leave for London almost at once, he had taken a passage on it rather than fly himself home, and then back again. As he told the others frankly, he was beginning to feel the strain of so much flying. Someone else could fly him for a change. It would give him an opportunity to relax.

Robinson solved the problem of his disposal by practically refusing to fly. He was in no hurry, and in spite of all that he had said, he preferred the sea. He went off, and was soon back to say that he had found a berth on a collier, then unloading, but would be returning to London in about a week. Biggles gave him a little money and, at parting, warned him to say nothing about the submarine he had seen, or the German who, until his death, had shared his lonely isle. Later he was to regret that he did not charge him to remain silent on the whole business, but he felt that he could hardly do that without arousing the man's curiosity. It did not seem altogether necessary, anyway.

Rather than leave the others merely killing time against his return, he suggested that, after they had had a couple of days rest, they might employ themselves usefully, provided the weather remained calm, by thoroughly exploring Hog Island for signs of recent occupation. Indeed, they might as well make an air reconnaissance of all the islands while they were at it. This would save time, as it would have to be done sooner or later.

Actually, as much as anything he was thinking of Robinson's shipmates, some of whom might have got ashore. Meanwhile, much as he hated wasting the unusually fine weather, he would have to go home for instructions. He would, he said, get back as quickly as possible. A couple of hours with the Air-Commodore should be sufficient for his purpose.

"Well, what's the news?" greeted the Air-Commodore when he walked in.
"The news is, whoever got that brilliant idea of a potential enemy

exploiting unoccupied islands, should be promoted right away,” answered Biggles seriously. “He was dead right.”

“Ah! As a matter of fact, it was Major Charles, of Security Intelligence.”

Biggles nodded. “I suspected it.”

“Sit down. He’s coming round. This will interest him.”

“He’ll be more than interested. He’ll be worried when I tell him what I know,” averred Biggles.

By the time he had pulled up a chair and lit a cigarette Major Charles had walked in. Looking at Biggles inquiringly, without preamble he asked: “Well, what’s the position? Raymond told me you were coming so I could only conclude that you’d tumbled on to something awkward.”

Biggles nodded. “It’s all that. The position is, at least one Russian submarine has been surveying the Crozets and the islands in the Magellan Strait. That’s as much as I know for certain. When I say surveying I mean they’ve actually been ashore.”

Major Charles was staring. “Magellan Strait! What do they want there?”

“As things stand, probably nothing—beyond the fact that the Straits are within easy striking distance of our base at the Falklands. But if it came to war, and anything went wrong with the Panama Canal, it would be a different cup of tea. The American fleet would be stuck either in the Pacific or the Atlantic, wherever it happened to be at the time. The only way it could get from one ocean to the other would be by running thousands of miles round the tip of South America, and that would be a nasty business if there happened to be a secret enemy base in the Straits.”

There was a brief silence. “How did you learn of this?” Major Charles asked Biggles. “The Magellan Straits weren’t in your itinerary.”

“I haven’t been there,” replied Biggles. “What I know is hearsay, but I’ve no reason to doubt its veracity.” He went on to tell of the finding of the castaway and what he had learned from him. “As I said just now, I’ll grant that most of this is hearsay; but I’d stand guarantee that every word of it is true,” he concluded. “I thought you’d better hear about it before I did anything else.”

There was another silence, longer than before. Major Charles toyed with a cigarette. “This mustn’t go beyond these four walls,” he said slowly. “It’s all very difficult. If the matter is reported officially the government could only send a note of protest to the offending country.”

“Which would, following usual Soviet practice, be met with a categorical denial,” stated Biggles cynically. “Of course.”

“Such a note would merely tell the Russians that we know what’s going on,” put in the Air-Commodore. “It would be better, for the time being at any rate, until we’re more sure of our ground, to pretend we know nothing.” Looking at Biggles he questioned: “What are your views about it?”

“I’d better go back and investigate further,” replied Biggles. “The next step is to find out how far the thing has gone. If it seems to be well advanced then I

imagine we shall be forced to take counter-action. Somehow I don't think the thing has gone very far yet. It's mostly been a matter of surveying. The Russians have certainly been ashore at Hog Island, in the Crozets. I'll go and have a look at it. In fact, my fellows are looking it over now. If we find nothing there I think it would be safe to assume that the scheme hasn't gone very far."

"I think that's a good idea," answered Major Charles. "Just now you mentioned counter-action. What exactly did you mean by that?"

"Well, we might be able to queer their pitch by putting—er—obstacles in the way."

"That would raise a scream."

"From whom?"

"Russia and the satellite countries."

"I don't see how they could scream without admitting liability for what's going on. I wasn't thinking of official action, though."

Major Charles looked worried. "Don't let us overlook the fact that we're not dealing with our own property—at any rate so far. The Crozets belong to France."

"I don't think you need lose any sleep on that account," rejoined Biggles. "Marcel Brissac, of the French Security Police, is co-operating with me."

"What about the Magellan Straits? That's Chilean territory."

Biggles shrugged. "You might as well say what about the United States? They're going to find themselves the meat in the sandwich one day if this plot isn't scotched. I'd say nothing to anybody. If you do, as sure as fate the big ears behind the Iron Curtain will get to hear of it. I'm not suggesting that we keep the soft pedal on the thing indefinitely. There's a danger in that. If the Russians think they're getting away with it they may extend their programme to a point where it gets too big for us to handle. Let's get our evidence for a start. When they realise that we've rumbled the racket they might call the whole thing off without any fuss. That would suit everybody."

Major Charles shook his head. "I don't like the idea of you putting foot on Chilean soil."

"Neither do I. But it may not come to that. Whether it does or not, I can't imagine that you're prepared to do nothing while a potential enemy establishes bases that would cut the lines of communication of ourselves and our allies. If you are, then I've been wasting my time."

Major Charles looked at the Air-Commodore. "What d'you think we'd better do?"

"Why not establish bases ourselves on the islands in question?"

The Security Officer looked pained. "But think of the cost, man! We've got enough calls on our resources as it is."

"That would simply line up with Russia's avowed policy of breaking Western Europe financially," put in Biggles.

"All right. The alternative is to let Russia spend the money," stated the Air-

Commodore. "Then we could blow the story and ask them to get out."

"And if they refused?" inquired Biggles blandly. "To try to throw them out would invite another war. Why not let the Navy lay some practice minefields round the threatened islands? That would queer the pitch of enemy submarines."

"If we did that shipping would have to be warned, and that would tell the Russians we know what's going on," said Major Charles. "What they would do in that case would be to switch to a fresh lot of islands."

"All right, sir. You tell me," requested Biggles. "I'm here to take your orders." He reached for another cigarette.

"Maybe it would be better if we didn't give him any orders," said the Air-Commodore, looking at Major Charles. "I say leave it to Bigglesworth. He'll think of something."

"Have it that way if you like," agreed Biggles. He smiled. "After all, if you don't give me any orders, I can't break them, can I? That would be a load off my mind, if not yours."

From Major Charles' expression he was not impressed.

"You need know nothing," went on Biggles. "I don't mind taking a rap if I overstep my duties. But things may not come to anything drastic. I suggest that for the moment I go back to try to find out just how far the scheme has gone. Don't ask me how I'm going to do that because, frankly, I don't know. But there may be a way. If it turns out that the thing is too big for me to handle, I'll get in touch with you, when you may wish to get a decision at a higher level. Actually, as I said just now, I don't think that the scheme has gone very far. It's mostly been a matter of surveying. The installation of equipment will follow in due course, no doubt. Robinson, the man I picked up, assumed that the submarine had departed for good and I didn't argue about it. Personally, I'm pretty sure it'll come back—either that or some other craft—with the equipment they intend to use."

The Air-Commodore looked at Major Charles. "Shall we leave it like that?"

"I feel we shall be skating on thin ice, but I can't think of anything better," confirmed Major Charles. "I'd like Bigglesworth, though, to be a bit more explicit about what he calls putting obstacles in the enemy's way."

"How can I answer that until I know what I'm faced with?" protested Biggles. "You'll have to leave that to me."

"Don't make it *too* drastic."

"I won't be more drastic than the circumstances demand," promised Biggles curtly. "Let's remember that there's a war on. Some people call it a Cold War, but those involved in it have discovered that the only difference between a Cold War and a Hot one is in the name. The muzzle velocity of a bullet is precisely the same in each case."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," conceded Major Charles sadly.

"Is that all?" asked Biggles. "If it is, I'll push along. I want to get the

evening plane back.”

“I’ve nothing more to say,” returned Major Charles.

“Nor I,” said the Air-Commodore.

“In that case I’ll pick up one or two little things I may need and get back to see what my fellows are doing,” said Biggles getting up.

He had actually reached the door when the Air-Commodore called him back; and there was something in the tone of voice that sent his eyebrows up questioningly.

“You should have told that man Robinson to keep his mouth shut,” adjured the Air-Commodore crisply.

Biggles came slowly back into the room. “I did. At least I told him to say nothing about the submarine, or the German who was marooned.”

“Well, it looks as if he’s done some talking, and wasted no time about it, either,” asserted the Air-Commodore grimly.

“Surely not?”

“The *Cape Argus* has got hold of the story anyway. Here’s the clipping. It’s been staring me in the face all the time. I haven’t had a chance to look at these papers before. They must have travelled up on the same plane that you did.”

Biggles’ expression was hard. “What does it say?”

“Not much, but the headline itself is enough to cause mischief. ‘Castaway picked up by plane from the Crozets.’ Here, read it yourself.” The Air-Commodore flicked the newspaper clipping across the desk.

Biggles picked it up and stared at it. It didn’t take him long to read the paragraph.

Robinson hadn’t said a lot, but he had told the reporter that he was a survivor from the *Kittiwake* and had been picked up on the Crozets. That, Biggles thought, did not matter very much. The unfortunate part of the story was, Robinson said that he had been rescued by an aircraft. There was no mention of the submarine, or the German; so, strictly speaking, he had kept his word.

“A pity. My fault,” admitted Biggles simply. “I should have been more explicit and told him to clamp down on the whole story. But I was afraid that if I did he would naturally want to know why, and I couldn’t tell him without revealing what we ourselves were doing there. I was relieved that it didn’t occur to him to ask me, for it would have been an awkward question to answer. I suppose I should have foreseen that he was bound to report the loss of the *Kittiwake*, and that that would lead to questions as to how and where it happened, and what had become of the rest of the crew. Robinson must have spoken to someone as soon as I lost sight of him, possibly someone on the ship that was going to bring him home. The Cape papers, being the nearest land to the Crozets, would naturally make a feature of it. Well, there it is.”

“It will be known by now, by the people who we were hoping wouldn’t know that we had been to the Crozets,” said the Air-Commodore pensively.

Major Charles spoke. "What may be even worse, certain of the enemy, remembering the German sailor who was put ashore, will almost certainly wonder if Robinson found him, and if so, how much talking they did together. They might well wonder at the same time if the plane that picked up Robinson also picked up the German. And they won't just stop at wondering. Enemy agents will be after Robinson hot foot to find out. They'll want to know all about the plane, too. If your name is mentioned..." The Security Officer broke off as if there was no need to say any more.

"I'll get after Robinson as soon as I get back," said Biggles, trying not to show his chagrin at what he felt was a bad slip on his part. "I'll warn him. I might just catch him. The *Lady Alice*—that was his ship—wasn't due to leave for a week."

"Tell him for heaven's sake to be careful."

"He won't have a clue to what it's all about," said Biggles. "I'll tell you what I can do. Rather than wait until I get back I'll send a cable to Algy asking him to see Robinson and warn him to keep clear of strangers. He'll know what I mean by that."

Biggles walked again towards the door. "Good-bye for the present, I'll be back when I've got the thing unfolded a little further."

He went out.

UNPLEASANT CONSEQUENCES

As Biggles sped southwards on the regular B.O.A.C. service to the Cape it was the unexpected development of the embarrassing newspaper publicity about Robinson that was chiefly on his mind. The complications that might arise from this concerned him more than the conduct of the original operation; for the time being at any rate. And the more he thought about it—and he had three days to ponder possible consequences—the less he liked the look of it. The fact that he felt it was all due to a blunder on his part, in not warning Robinson to be silent, did nothing to soothe his concern; a concern that was not far short of alarm, for he perceived that he might have put the man in a position of some danger, should enemy agents get on his track. His hope was that Algy had interpreted his cablegram correctly and put Robinson on his guard.

Such was his apprehension on this score that the moment he landed at his destination, before doing anything else, he jumped into a taxi and drove to the dock where the *Lady Alice* was berthed. To his great relief he saw that the grimy coal boat was still there, so telling his driver to wait, he walked quickly towards the gangway, where a sailor who looked like the skipper was standing talking to one of his officers.

“Do you mind if I have a word with one of your crew—a fellow named Robinson?” began Biggles

The two men studied him with what Biggles thought was an unnecessary amount of attention. Then it was the captain who spoke. “You’d like a word with him, eh?”

“I would.”

“So would I,” was the curt rejoinder.

It was Biggles’ turn to stare. “What d’you mean by that?”

“Just what I said.” The skipper was blunt to the point of rudeness.

“You mean he isn’t here?”

“That’s it. That’s just what I do mean. Who are you, anyway? Another one of these reporters?”

Biggles showed his Scotland Yard badge, which brought about a change of atmosphere. “I’m looking for Robinson,” he said again. “Will you tell me what you know about him?”

“That won’t take long,” answered the skipper. “The young devil came to me with that hard luck story about being cast away on the Crozets and asked me to take him on so that he could get home, which I did.”

“Yes, I knew that,” acknowledged Biggles.

“Last Tuesday, I think it was, he came to me and said that as he was short of money could I let him have an advance of five quid. I don’t know how

many he told that yarn to, but like a mug I fell for it and gave him the money.”

“Well, what’s wrong with that?”

“I ain’t seen him since. He’s skipped.”

Biggles bit his lip when he realised what this implied. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he said in a low voice. “There’s nothing wrong with Robinson. If he isn’t here, it’s because he couldn’t get here. I’m afraid he’s run into trouble. Have you heard nothing of him at all?”

“He was seen at the pub over there, one evening, having a drink with a couple of loafers who didn’t look like seamen. That’s all I know. I didn’t see him myself.”

“Who did see him?”

The skipper indicated his companion with a short-stemmed pipe. “My mate.”

Biggles looked at the man. “When was this?”

“It’d be Wednesday about half-past nine. I dropped in to have a pint.”

“I’m sorry to ask so many questions, but this is a serious matter,” went on Biggles apologetically. “Could you give me a description of these men Robinson was with?”

“Well, I really didn’t pay much attention,” admitted the sailor. “It’s true I had a second look at ‘em, because I could see from the cut of their jibs that they weren’t sailors, and I wondered what their game was, chumming up with a deck hand. I mean to say, they were a bit too well dressed to have any honest business at the dockside. They were both about forty, I’d say, and wore dark suits. One was a stocky sort of bloke. The other was taller, and thin, with prominent cheek bones, as if he could do with a square meal.”

“You didn’t catch any of the conversation?”

“No. They were talking when I went in, but they closed up like oysters when they clapped eyes on me, as if Robinson might have told them I was off his ship.”

“I see,” said Biggles, in an expressionless voice. “Thanks for what you’ve told me. If Robinson should turn up, you might send word to police headquarters.”

“He’ll have to buck up if he’s coming with us,” said the skipper. “We’re going out on the tide.”

Biggles nodded. “In that case you probably won’t see him. So long. Thanks again.”

Worried and depressed he walked back to the taxi and told the driver to take him to the airport hotel, where they were lodging, and where he expected to find the others waiting for him.

That Robinson was in trouble he did not doubt. What he couldn’t understand was why Algy had failed to obey his cabled instructions. At all events, he felt sure that Algy hadn’t spoken to Robinson or the man wouldn’t have been such a fool as to associate with strangers in a low public house. Again, even if Algy had looked for him and failed to find him he would

almost certainly have gone to the captain of his ship to ask where he was. Clearly, Algy hadn't been to the ship to make inquiries or the skipper would have mentioned it. It was true that Algy hadn't acknowledged his cable; but then he hadn't asked him to, thinking it unnecessary. Moreover, it might have been difficult to get a message through while he, Biggles, was in transit.

With these perplexing questions on his mind, Biggles paid off his driver, and picking up his bag went in to the hotel, fully expecting to find the others waiting for him in the vestibule. Indeed, he had thought they might be at the airport, for they would know the scheduled time of the arrival of the London plane. Not seeing them, he went on to the reception desk. "Do you happen to know if my friends are in?" he asked the girl in charge, who knew him well by sight.

"No, they're not here," was the disappointing reply.

"Any message for me?"

The girl glanced at the pigeonhole above the number of Biggles' room. "No, nothing."

For the first time Biggles experienced a wave of uneasiness. "When did you last see my friends?"

"Now you mention it, I don't remember seeing them for two or three days," was the staggering reply. "It would be—let me see—yes, Thursday when they went out. That's right. They asked to be called early."

"And they haven't been back?"

"I haven't seen them. In fact, they couldn't have come home because there's a cable here for Mr. Lacey. It came after they'd gone."

"Mind if I look at it?"

The girl handed it over.

Biggles tore it open. It was, as he knew it must be, his own message to Algy. Algy had never received it. It had missed him. That explained the position with regard to Robinson.

Biggles gave the receptionist a wan smile. "Thanks," he said. "I'll leave my bag here for the moment. I'm coming back."

It was now nearly dark. Weary from his long journey and now definitely upset, he called a cab and went to the marine airport. A single Sunderland floated at its moorings. He called to a maintenance official who knew him. "When did the other Sunderland leave?"

"A couple of days ago, as near as I can remember. Took off about daybreak."

This, confirming the receptionist's story, told Biggles all he needed to know. The machine had gone out and it hadn't returned. That could only mean something had gone wrong.

Algy, he was sure, wouldn't stay out all night unless compelled by circumstances beyond his control. Obviously, he was not coming back tonight, either.

For a little while Biggles stood there, staring unseeingly across the dark

water. On the face of it there was nothing he could do until daylight. To look for the missing aircraft in the dark would be futile. But he felt he had to do something. Making his way back to his cab, which he had told to wait, an idea occurred to him, although he was not optimistic about its outcome. He told the driver to take him to police headquarters. Entering, he asked for the Chief Inspector, and having introduced himself, showing his papers, inquired if by any chance a body had been picked up during the past week. He was thinking, of course, of Robinson, whose presumed fate was now pressing heavily on his conscience.

“Yes, we did pick up a chap,” answered the inspector. “Looked like a sailor. He had nothing on him by which he could be identified.”

“Dead?”

“No, but mighty near it.”

“What does he look like?”

“Thin, about twenty. Might have been through a rough time.”

“Where did you find him?”

“In the harbour.”

“What has happened to him?”

“Someone had coshed him on the skull and tipped him in the water. He was lucky. One of the harbour watchers was baling his dinghy when he heard a splash, and looking up saw a car making off. Thinking it looked fishy, he rowed over and pulled out a body just as it was sinking. The fellow is still unconscious; fractured skull, I believe. As I say, we know nothing about him. We’re waiting for him to wake up and tell us.”

“Where is he?”

“In the general hospital.”

“Mind if I have a look at him?”

“Think you may know him?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll run you along.”

“Thanks.”

A police car took them to the hospital, and a minute or two later Biggles was looking at the corpse-like face of the man he had picked up on Possession Island. He was shaven, and his hair had been cut, but there was no mistaking the emaciated face and little pinched-in nose.

Biggles turned sombre eyes to the police officer. “Yes, it’s the man I thought it might be,” he confirmed. To the nurse who had brought them to the bed, he said: “How is he?”

“Pretty bad, but the doctor thinks he has a chance.”

“I see. Thank you, nurse.” Biggles turned to the inspector. “That’s all.”

Outside on the pavement he explained. “His name’s Robinson—Alfred Robinson—of Wapping, London. He’s a sailor. He’s had a tough time. He was booked to go home on the *Lady Alice*. She must have sailed by now.”

“Who’d be likely to crack his skull and why?”

“Strictly between ourselves, I’d say Russian secret agents. Although he’s quite unaware of it, the unfortunate fellow, by the merest chance, happens to know more than is good for his health.”

“So it seems,” answered the inspector grimly. He threw a sidelong glance at Biggles. “What’s going on?”

“Sorry, but I can’t tell you any more for the moment,” replied Biggles apologetically. “It’s top secret in London.”

“Is this what brought you here?”

“Yes. But I may not be here tomorrow—or the next day. I’ll look you up when I get back. Meanwhile, you’d oblige me greatly by keeping a close eye on Robinson, and saying nothing about him to anyone. If the people who knocked him on the head discover that he is still alive, it’s more than likely that they’ll try and make a better job of it. If Robinson comes round, warn him, if only for his own sake, to keep his mouth shut.”

“I’ll see to it,” promised the inspector. “Do you mind if I have a talk with Robinson when he’s well enough?”

Biggles hesitated. “No. But keep anything he tells you under your hat.”

“I was thinking he might be able to describe his assailants.”

“If he does, leave them alone—for the time being anyway.”

“Why?”

“Because if you pick them up, you’d have to charge them, and that would mean bringing Robinson into the picture.”

“If these thugs were under lock and key they couldn’t hurt him.”

“Maybe not, but others would. Find out who the assailants were by all means, but I’d do no more than watch them till we’re ready to deal with them.”

“If that’s how you want it.”

“Well, I think that’s all for now,” concluded Biggles. “Thanks for your co-operation, inspector. You’ve taken a load off my mind. You see, in a way, I felt responsible for Robinson and I thought he’d had it.”

“Can I drop you anywhere?”

“At the airport hotel, if you’re going that way.”

“No trouble at all.”

Feeling a trifle better, but still far from happy, Biggles parted from the inspector at the door of the hotel. Passing the reception desk he picked up the bag he had left there and asked the night porter, who had now come on duty, to see that he was called without fail in the morning at five o’clock. Then, deep in thoughts that were certainly not conducive to an untroubled night, he went on up to his room. A glance showed that it was just as he had left it. There was no message from Algy or the others—not that he expected to find one there. A note would have been left with the management. The absence of anything of the sort made it clear that when Algy had set out for wherever he had gone, presumably for the Crozets, he had no reason to suspect that he would not be coming straight back; otherwise he would have left word of his

intention.

Biggles dropped into the easy chair, lit a cigarette and closed his eyes. He wanted to think; and he felt that he had plenty to occupy his mind. Not that all the guessing in the world would provide the answer to the question now uppermost in his mind—what had become of the missing flying boat? He could, of course, think of several possibilities, none of which he cared to entertain. In the morning, after he had had a night's rest, he would take the other machine and try to arrive at the correct one.

GINGER GOES ASHORE

ON the departure of Biggles for the United Kingdom, the others, having sat about for two days, resting, then proceeded without question on the lines Biggles had laid down to keep them occupied usefully. These appeared to be so straightforward that no serious discussion about them was considered necessary. They would simply fly out to the Crozets and look for signs of occupation, not forgetting the possibility of survivors from the ill-fated *Kittiwake* being on one or other of the islands. Given fair weather they would in particular have a good look at Hog Island, where, according to the German who had been marooned, the submarine had spent some time. Given a continuance of the fair weather there appeared to be no difficulty in landing at Deliverance Bay.

The project was regarded as nothing more than a routine sortie, and the only question raised was whether to employ one aircraft or both. After a brief discussion, it was decided to use only one of the two machines available. Naturally, they preferred to be together, and there seemed to be every reason why they should make a party of it. It would be more economical in the matter of fuel; it would lengthen the life of the spare machine without being subject to complete overhaul, bearing in mind that both Sunderlands had done a tremendous amount of flying without one; and finally, as it was intended that some of them should go ashore, there would be enough personnel for this purpose whilst at the same time leaving an adequate guard on the aircraft. It was generally agreed that, in regard to this latter point, the employment of two machines would only complicate matters.

Wherefore, at the first streak of dawn on the Thursday following Biggles' departure for London, Algy's machine cast off and set a course for the dreary islands far out in the lonely seas. Everyone was in good spirits, for the weather was as fair as it was ever likely to be in a region notorious for storms. That is to say, it was cold but clear, with little wind, and consequently only a slight sea. These conditions were unusual and could not be expected to persist, so the advisability of making the most of them was evident. In a word, Algy, as leader of the party, could not have asked for anything better.

A look-out was kept during the run for marine craft of any sort, but none was seen, and the islands crept up over the horizon with nothing more than an occasional whale, and one or two icebergs, having been sighted.

Algy, always bearing in mind that the weather might change, headed straight for Hog Island. In the present conditions a landing in Deliverance Bay would present no difficulties whatever, whereas, should a sea get up, there would be risks which he preferred not to take. Obviously, he said, it would be better to get that part of the programme completed while the opportunity

offered. The air survey of the other islands could be made in any weather providing visibility remained reasonable. The others concurred.

All this was decided almost casually, and no arrangements were made for contingencies that seemed unlikely to arise. At the first sign of any change of weather Algy said he would fire a Verey light to recall those who had gone ashore. This was the only precaution taken and nothing more seemed necessary.

The fact of the matter was, no one expected seriously to find anyone alive on any of the islands. The possibility was not even mentioned, with the result that the operation continued as a mere routine patrol. This, in view of the many fruitless journeys made over the preceding weeks, was understandable; but Algy in particular was to blame himself bitterly for what, in the light of subsequent events, was an example of the unpardonable folly of taking too much for granted. Of course, not having seen a vessel of any sort during the hours they had been in the air was no doubt largely responsible for the assumption that they had the ocean to themselves.

Algy put the Sunderland down on Deliverance Bay without trouble, and taxiing close inshore to dead calm water, dropped anchor in five fathoms about a cable's length from the proposed landing place. Biscuits and a cup of tea were dished out to all hands from the Thermos while the final arrangements, such as they were, were made.

There was, Algy said, no need for them all to go ashore. Two could see anything there was to be seen. He himself intended to stay with the aircraft. Berrie could put Ginger and Marcel ashore from the dinghy and stay with it until they returned. It should be said in passing that Marcel had expressed a wish to go ashore. As the Crozets were French possessions, he felt that his government would expect him to have a look round while he was there. This was such a reasonable suggestion that its acceptance was a foregone conclusion. No one had anything else to say, so the matter was soon settled. The dinghy was launched. Berrie, wrapped in a duffle coat to keep him warm while he waited, paddled Ginger and Marcel to a convenient shelf of rock on which they had merely to step out.

There was no difficulty whatever about this landing, for the shore, although rock, looked almost as if it had been designed by nature for the purpose. The rock, a sort of soft tufa, like pumice stone, was obviously of volcanic origin—as indeed were most of the islands of the group. But within the curving horseshoe of the bay it appeared that the lava of some prehistoric eruption had flowed down to the water in a series of broad, flat waves, which upon hardening on contact with the sea, had formed, as it were, a series of wide, shallow steps leading up to the higher ground. The effect was, in fact, that of a big ready-made slip-way, and this was remarked casually as they stepped out on it.

After seeing them on their way, Bertie strolled about to await their return. He did not expect them to be long, and the break gave him an opportunity to

stretch his legs. For a little while he amused himself trying to stalk a baby seal, but its mother arrived, and having shown her teeth at him took her offspring to a safer locality.

After one comprehensive survey of the island from the first high point they reached, Ginger did not think they would be long, either; for a more dismal spectacle had never been presented to his eyes. Grim, desolate and utterly wretched, with a complete absence of trees, the place appeared to be the end of the world. The only vegetation was lichen, moss and some harsh tussocky grass that grew in the peat that occurred in the boggy depressions. Gulls of many sorts, taking no notice of the visitors, drifted in a disconsolate sort of way round the deeply cut shore. Their eggs and broken shells lay about everywhere. He could see a rookery of seals, lying on flat, wave-splashed rocks, some way off; and there were marks of rabbits; but these were the only signs of life in what was plainly a harsh existence.

Marcel, after gazing at this melancholy prospect, turned to Ginger and grimaced; an expression that revealed his opinion more clearly than words.

There was now a debate on which way they should go, for the island was of some size, with numerous hills and ridges of rock to limit the view. Ginger was in favour of making for the highest point, although this would mean a stiff climb, hoping from the top to see everything in one sweep of the eyes. Marcel was against this, however, saying it would take too long. Considering the matter Ginger saw that he was right. It would take a long time to scale the hill. Moreover, it was unnecessary. If there was anyone on the island it was reasonable to suppose that they wouldn't have to go far without finding some indication of it.

In this he was correct, for in walking on, taking the easiest route, which was only a short distance back from the coast, they picked up a small, pasteboard carton. It was wet and weatherstained, but some printed words, presumably the name of the contents, were still legible. They could not be read, though, for the language used was known to neither of them; but from the type of lettering, it was decided that the carton was of Russian origin and had probably contained cigarettes.

"That proves that someone has been here," said Marcel.

"Nothing to do with the *Kittiwake*, either," returned Ginger. "British sailors would be unlikely to have anything but British cigarettes—if they had any serviceable cigarettes at all by the time they got here. If we look at it like that we need no longer doubt that the story which Willy the German told Robinson was a hundred per cent true. Anyway, somebody has been here fairly recently; there's no question at all about that."

If further proof of this was needed, it was soon forthcoming. They had gone on only for a short distance when a spot of bright red attracted their attention. It turned out to be a slither of rock, painted red and set on end. It was supported by other pieces of rock. There was a number on it.

"That can't be anything but a surveyor's mark," declared Ginger. "They

had to use rock, and set it on end like that, because there are few places where it would be possible to drive in a peg.”

He studied the terrain around and observed that they were at the extremity of a fairly extensive open space, one which, without a great deal of labour, could be levelled. It overlooked the open sea. He pointed to another marker, made conspicuous, as must have been intended, by its bright colour. “No doubt there are others, if we cared to look for them,” he told Marcel. “I don’t think we need bother. This, really, is all we wanted to know.”

“*C’est vrai, absolument,*” muttered Marcel frowning. “Something is going to happen here, I think. The marks are made. Soon will come men to stay here and make the island a fortress.”

Ginger nodded. “That’s the answer.”

“I go home and make report of this to my government,” declared Marcel, whose most obvious reaction was one of indignation at this violation of French territory. “When these Russians come back, they shall see the Tricolore on a high pole. That will make them to think, *mon ami.*”

Ginger did not answer. He was staring at an object on an area of mossy ground a little way ahead. He perceived clearly that it was a rabbit. It was the behaviour of the animal that puzzled him. It was jumping about in short jerks round a narrow circle of moss that its activities had already flattened. He started to walk towards it, and he did not have to go far before the mystery was solved. The wretched rodent was caught by the neck in a snare.

The effect of this discovery, and what it immediately implied, produced in Ginger such a shock that he stopped dead, gripping Marcel by the arm. His manner became alert, his eyes active. His voice, when he spoke, dropped to a whisper. “Marcel! There’s somebody here *now*. There *must* be. That animal has only just been caught. The snare must only recently have been set.”

Marcel’s expression had changed too “*Oui,*” he breathed. “Who would make a trap if he did not intend to stay?”

To Ginger, and no doubt to Marcel, the whole atmosphere had changed in a flash. Before, the place had been merely desolate and depressing. Now it had taken on a darkly threatening aspect; one of impending peril; all the more intense because it could not be seen or gauged.

For a minute or two longer they stood still, tense, staring about them, as if expecting something to happen. An uncomfortable feeling grew on Ginger that they were being watched by unseen eyes.

“Could it be men from Robinson’s ship?” asked Marcel in a low voice.

“No,” answered Ginger flatly. “Had it been, they would have seen or heard the machine arrive, and would have shown themselves by now. Besides, they would have fixed up a distress signal—a flag, or something. No. Take it from me, the people here don’t want to be rescued.”

He hastened forward, released the rabbit, which scampered away, and held up the wire noose significantly. “This is new brass wire,” he said.

“Shipwrecked seamen would hardly have new brass cable wire in their

pockets. Look at the peg. It's hard wood, properly made, the sort that you buy at the shop for the job. It didn't get here by accident. It was brought deliberately for the purpose for which it is being used. Rabbits are food, don't forget, and fresh food on Hog Island must be a welcome change from canned stuff. Incidentally, this place was supposed to be overrun with rabbits. Where are they? I don't see many. My guess is that most of them have gone into the pot."

"What shall we do? Shall we find these people?"

"I think we'd be wise to get out before they find us."

"You think they haven't seen us yet?"

"I don't know. It may suit them to hide, hoping that we'll go away without suspecting they're here. But if once they realise that we do know, they'll see to it that we don't go off and tell the world that there are settlers in the Crozets. I'm not suggesting that they might guess the reason why we are here. If they saw us they'd probably take us to be casual visitors—naturalists, or something of the sort. But you may be sure they don't want anybody to know they are here, much less what they're doing."

"*Alors!* Then you think we shall run away?"

"We needn't run, but we'd better go. What else can we do? What could we do if we found these people? Tell them to go? They'd laugh at us—or shoot us. That would be asking for trouble. Our line is to keep clear of trouble until we can tell Biggles about this. Let's move off."

Marcel agreed reluctantly. "I do not like this running away on soil that belongs to France, but perhaps you are right. If we are killed it will help nobody."

"Us, least of all," asserted Ginger grimly. "Come on!"

At a brisk pace, eyeing the surrounding rocks suspiciously, they started to retrace their steps.

They were about half way back to the bay when Ginger was startled, if not bewildered, to hear the Sunderland's engines start up. There was no sign of a change in the weather, but he knew that something demanding urgent action must have occurred. The starting of the engines could mean nothing else. What puzzled him, and to some extent allayed his anxiety, was the fact that the pre-arranged recall signal had not been fired. "We'd better hurry," he said, and broke into a run.

As they ran, they heard the roar of the engines rise to a pitch that could only mean that the flying-boat was taking off. For what possible reason it should leave without them was more than he could imagine. He was soon to know. Cutting through the bellowing engines came the chatter of machine guns, to be followed a moment later by the grunting bark of an automatic cannon. That this was not from the aircraft he knew, for it carried no such armament. Coming to an abrupt stop he turned a distraught face to Marcel. He said nothing. There seemed to be no need to say anything. The sounds spoke for themselves.

As they went on again, panting and speechless, they saw the Sunderland soar into view, heading out to sea. As they watched it they saw it swing south as if making for Possession or one of the other islands.

“What do we do?” asked Marcel, in a strangely calm voice.

Ginger did not answer. He hurried on to the last ridge, and looking over the rocks saw the answer to everything. He was not particularly surprised by what he saw, either, for by this time he had worked out that there could be only one explanation.

Moving slowly into Deliverance Bay was a drab-painted submarine.

On how and from where it had so suddenly appeared Ginger wasted no time in conjecture. The fact that it was there was enough. Turning to Marcel, taking care not to let himself be seen from the bay, he simply said: “We’d better find somewhere to hide.”

Marcel was aghast. “But how can we stay here? We have no house, no food, no fire. We shall die.”

“Listen, Marcel,” answered Ginger, speaking distinctly. “We shall die even more quickly if the toughs in that submarine catch us. From the way they shot at the machine we need be in no doubt as to how they feel about visitors.”

“But how shall we live?”

“I haven’t a clue,” admitted Ginger. “The problem won’t arise if we stand here yammering much longer. Let’s get out of sight for a start.”

They set off, not going in any particular direction, for knowing practically nothing about the island one way seemed as good as another. Nor did they really know what they were looking for. Instinctively, they kept low among the rocks, near the shore, to reduce their chances of being seen.

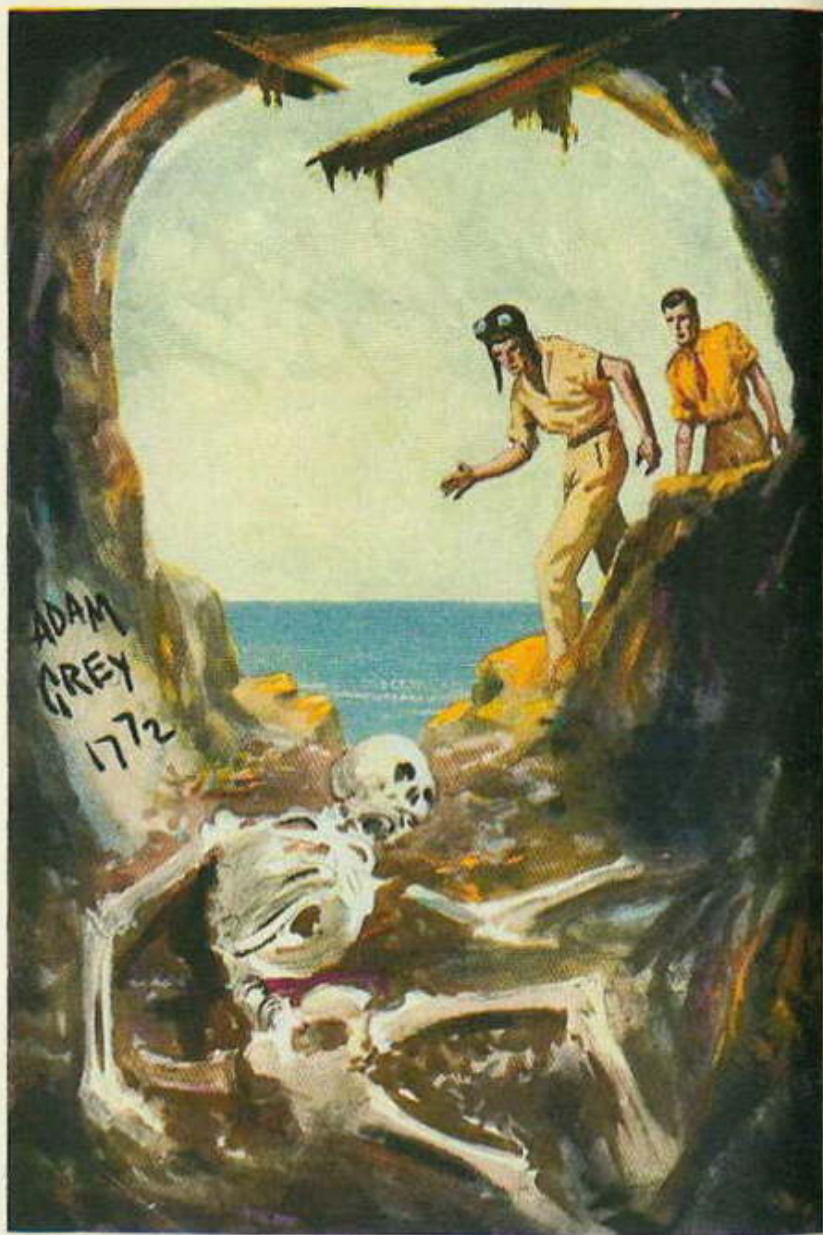
In this way they travelled for perhaps a quarter of a mile, and then, after considering several cavities between or under the rocks, found a crevice that appeared to suit their purpose so well that they went no farther. At first Ginger assumed that it was an entirely natural one, overlooking the sea; but on exploring the retreat he observed with mixed feelings that they are not the first occupants. Someone had laid lengths of wood, that looked like the planks of a small boat, from rock to rock across the top, which otherwise would have been open. On these had been piled slabs of peat, held down by lumps of rock, to form a roof. That all this had been done long ago was evident from the rotting and dilapidated state of the whole miserable affair. It seemed doubtful if the roof any longer served its original purpose of keeping off the rain.

Wondering vaguely what unfortunate wretch had been forced to resort to such a primitive dwelling, he went inside and saw the answer lying on the ground. He was still there—or rather, an untidy litter of bones that had been his skeleton. Bleached and broken by long exposure, they had obviously been there for a long time.

For a moment or two Ginger and Marcel looked at each other with expressions of repugnance, and but for the desperate state of their own affairs they would no doubt have departed promptly to look for somewhere less

suggestive of their own ultimate fate. Then Ginger braced himself and put on as bold a front as he could muster. "I'm staying here," he announced. "We've come a bit late to help this poor blighter, but he won't mind us using his dug-out, I'm sure. We should be able to keep reasonably dry here. If we get wet through in this brutal cold, with no means of drying ourselves, we've had it."

Investigating further they found roughly painted on the rock in lamp black, the name 'Adam Grey.' Below was the date, '1772'.



"We've come a bit late to help this poor blighter. . . ."
(See page 72)

"I hope we don't have to stay here as long as he has," observed Ginger, with a rather feeble attempt at humour. "Let's have a look and see what's happening," he went on. "The next move, I imagine, will depend on whether or not these land grabbers know we are here. We shall soon know."

Peeping over the rocks, with renewed alarm they saw a heavily-built, bearded man emerging from just beyond the place where they had found the rabbit. He was walking towards the bay, from which direction six men in dark uniforms were advancing to meet him. The two parties soon met, and held what was obviously an earnest discussion. Then they all walked towards the bay and disappeared from sight.

"So there was a man here," said Marcel.

"One at least," answered Ginger.

"Perhaps he goes now, in the submarine, with the others."

"That would suit us fine. We'll see. There's nothing we can do except stay here and let things sort themselves out."

"Biggles will come."

"Of course he will, but not yet. Today is only Thursday, remember. He won't be back at Cape Town until Saturday evening at the earliest, so it's no use expecting him before Sunday."

"Perhaps Algy will do something."

"He does at least know we're here, but I don't see how he can do anything while that submarine is in the bay—even if he's in a state to do anything."

"*Tiens!* What are you saying?"

"From the way the machine was flying, I've got an uncomfortable feeling that it had been hit," answered Ginger gloomily. "Algy started off straight out to sea. No doubt he'd do that to try to kid the people on the submarine that all his crew was aboard and he was making for home. Why, then, did he suddenly swing round towards Possession Island? I can only think it was because he discovered that he'd been hit. That's how it strikes me, but it's no use guessing. We shall just have to sit tight and wait for somebody else to make a move."

They went back into the dug-out, as the shelter was automatically called. With scant ceremony Marcel moved the bones of the long dead sailor aside with his foot and sat down on a square stone which, from the position in which it had been placed, had been the chair of the unlucky mariner. Ginger, brooding, wondered how many solitary hours the man had sat on it, watching the sea for help that never came.

This sombre thought brought home the seriousness of their own plight. It was not as hopeless as that, but it was bad enough. Strangely, their greatest danger lay not in remaining undiscovered, but in being found before Biggles or Algy arrived to take them off, as they were sure would happen sooner or later.

They should, he thought, be able to hold out until Sunday, if necessary without food, supposing that Algy did not turn up in the meantime. So their prospect, with the inevitable privations that would have to be endured, while not an enviable one, was not hopeless. The real peril was the presence on the island of men who, having been brought up to believe that ruthlessness was efficiency, would ensure their silence, if they found them, by destroying them.

Witness the way they had, without provocation, fired on the flying boat.

What had happened in the bay needed no great effort to visualise. The submarine must have been travelling under water when the Sunderland approached the island; or possibly it had been on the surface, but hearing an aircraft approaching, had submerged. Either way the result was the same. Algy or Bertie must have seen it coming, and rather than risk an encounter that would almost certainly have been fatal to all of them, had taken off as the only hope of saving the aircraft and its crew.

Presumably the submarine had been close in when it surfaced; at all events, Bertie had not had time to fetch them or even make the necessary signal. Algy would realise that they would hear the machine take off, and from that take warning that something was amiss—as did in fact happen. It was hard to see what else he could do in the circumstances. What he would do next would depend on whether or not the aircraft had been damaged. If the machine had to be ditched, or crash-landed on Possession Island—but Ginger preferred not to think about that. The Sunderland had picked up its dinghy. At any rate, Ginger could not remember seeing it in the bay. True, he hadn't looked for it, but he felt sure he would have noticed it, had it been abandoned. He took comfort from the thought that if Algy was all right he knew where they were and how they were fixed.

Still pondering the matter, he perceived that much would depend on whether their presence on the island was known to the people already there, or to those on the submarine, which would be the same thing. If they supposed, as they might, that the aircraft had its full complement on board when it had taken off, they were likely to be left in peace. On the other hand, if it were known that two members of its crew had been left ashore, all hands would be turned to the task of finding them, to find out who they were and what they were doing there. For in view of the illegal nature of their undertaking the Russians could hardly fail to be disturbed in their minds to find an aircraft on the sea.

Ginger went out and took another cautious peep over the rocks. On all sides the island lay bleak and bare. Not a soul was in sight. He returned to Marcel, whose eyebrows asked a question.

“Can't see anybody,” said Ginger. “But we should be silly, I think, to start moving about just yet.”

Marcel agreed.

“The important thing to us is this; will that chap who was on the island stay with the submarine or go back to wherever he came from? Everything really depends on knowing where he is. We ought to keep watch. I suggest we take turns—anyway until it gets too dark to see.”

Again Marcel agreed.

“All right, I'll start,” offered Ginger.

He went out again, and finding a niche in the rocks that commanded a view in the desired direction, settled down to what he knew would be a cheerless

vigil. The rocks were damp, and like blocks of ice to the touch. The air, too, was bitterly cold and had a penetrating quality that was more chilling than clean dry frost. The only moving things that he could see were the gulls that drifted about in an aimless sort of way. He wondered if he would be reduced to eating them.

Slowly the day began to die. Of human life still there was no sign.

STRANGE HARBOUR

GINGER'S summing up of the situation as far as Algy and Bertie was concerned was accurate almost to the last detail. It was Bertie who had first seen the submarine, for Algy, with nothing particularly on his mind, was in the navigation cabin, checking courses to the other islands of the group preparatory to making a complete round of them. Not that he expected to see anything on The Apostles, ten of which are mere towering rocks.

Bertie was sitting on the shore, behind a mass of tufa that sheltered him from the slight but keen breeze, nibbling a chocolate biscuit as he gazed across the unbroken expanse of grey water that surrounded them. There was too much of it, he soliloquised, much too much. Hog was a good name for an island condemned to such isolation and he would be glad to see the last of it. Even the hogs had died. No wonder.

Still musing, he suddenly stopped munching, his mouth half open, his eyes focused on a spot about half a mile away. Was he seeing things ? He would have sworn that a minute before there was nothing there. But there was something there now, and he had no difficulty in identifying it. It was the conning tower of a submarine. The steel hull was still awash, but surfacing, from the way it was spilling water.

Bertie wasted no time admiring the spectacle. He knew the probable nationality and business of any submarine likely to be in the vicinity of the Crozet Islands. With a shout he sprang to his feet and without waiting for Algy to answer jumped into the dinghy and began paddling furiously towards the aircraft. Seeing Algy appear he desisted for a moment to point, and then resumed his high-speed exercise. He next saw Algy in the bows, cutting the cable. By the time he reached the cabin door, Algy was back, waiting to grab the paddle that he held out to him in order to pull the dinghy in. Bertie jumped out.

Algy hung on to the dinghy. "We shall need it to pick up the others," he muttered. Together they dragged the unwieldy craft inboard.

"Aren't you going to wait for the others?" asked Bertie.

"No."

Bertie looked shocked. "But we can't leave them, old boy."

"We shall have to. It's their only hope as well as ours. If this submarine is what we may suppose it to be, it would be suicide to stay here. If we lose the plane we've lost everything. Our best chance is to get clear." Algy had not had time to consider the situation. He was acting purely on intuition; but even had more time been available he would no doubt have taken what seemed to be the only sane course.

How far he was right was soon to be demonstrated. Leaving Algy to close

the door, he dashed through to the control room, and with his eyes on the approaching craft, started up. The engines had not had time to get cold, so in a matter of seconds the Sunderland, swiftly gathering speed, was skimming across the grey water.

The acceleration of its departure may have taken the submarine commander by surprise. He must have been as astonished to see the aircraft there as those in the aircraft were to see the submarine. At all events, the Sunderland was clear of the water by the time the submarine registered disapproval of its presence. A machine gun chattered. Some bullets struck the aircraft. Wincing, Algy took evasive action. He held his breath when a small calibre automatic cannon opened up. The shells were of the tracer kind. None hit the machine, but some came close. Still taking evasive action, as far as this was possible with such a big machine, Algy dived for speed and then swung up in a climbing turn towards the open sea.

At this juncture Bertie burst in on him, white with anger. "Those infernal pirates have hit us," he announced.

"I know."

"We're losing juice. I thought I'd better let you know."

"Okay. Find the damage and tell me the worst." Algy turned back towards the main group of islands.

Just what he was going to do he did not know. All he knew was he daren't take the risk of trying to make the sixteen hundred mile passage back to Cape Town if he was losing fuel.

He would do better to keep within range of something more solid than water—at any rate until the extent of the damage was ascertained. For that information he would have to await a report from Bertie, who, he did not doubt, was doing everything possible.

The machine was now out of danger from the submarine's guns so he decided to cruise around until the vital news was forthcoming. Outwardly he was calm. Inwardly he was seething with rage at the unprovoked attack, and mortification at having been caught napping. He was also sick with anxiety on account of Ginger and Marcel. What they would say of him for abandoning them was something too painful to think about, but he was still sure that what he had done was the only thing to do.

The other islands were now in view. The nearest was Penguin, the island on which, he recalled, no one had yet managed to set foot on account of its precipitous shores. He headed towards the forbidding mass of rock that rose for a thousand feet sheer, like a monstrous medieval castle, from the water that foamed around its foundations. He had no ambition to be the first man to stand in any particular place, certainly not this hideous mountain top, for that, according to official hand-books, was what it was. He was not contemplating landing on it. Not for a moment did it occur to him that it might be possible for any type of aircraft to land on it without reducing itself to matchwood, for as far as he could judge, as he approached from a height rather less than that

of the mountain itself, it consisted of rock and nothing else. At one place, from a point near the top, a cascade of water, looking like a great white ostrich feather, dropped straight into the sea.

He paid no particular attention to it at first, but as he took a little more altitude in order to see over the summit he looked at it again, for here before him was something on which he had not reckoned, something which, he realised, no other man on earth had seen, or apparently suspected. For the top of the island was not rock, as he had naturally supposed, but water; a broad black lake of it.

Algy stared at this phenomenon with astonished eyes, and as he did so it dawned on him that the island was not a solid mountain, as had always been supposed, but the hollow cone of an extinct volcano, in the manner of some of the smaller islands they had visited, such as Saint Paul. The only difference was, here the volcano had, when in eruption, blown out its core, leaving the shell empty. In the case of the others, the walls had been broken down nearly to sea level, either by the fury of the fires within, or the action of the water outside. In short, the mountain was a fraud. It was a colossal basin. And it was not an empty one. It was filled to the brim with water, rain water no doubt, which through the centuries had run down the inside of the rocks. So full was it that it was overflowing at the lowest point of the outer shell, forming the waterfall that he had noted.

The walls that hemmed in the water were not by any means level. The rim was broken and ragged, so that in time of heavy rain there would be several waterfalls where the overflow spilled out. Nowhere, therefore, was the water level higher than the lowest point of the encircling wall.

In most places it was from fifty to a hundred feet below this outer rim.

But even so, this meant that the main bulk of water was hundreds of feet above the level of the surrounding sea, and Algy found himself considering with awe what a fearful spectacle would be provided should the wall suddenly collapse under the enormous pressure from within.

It was a sobering thought. No ship within many miles would have a hope of surviving such a colossal deluge. Perhaps this was how some tidal waves were started, he pondered.

As he flew straight on over this remarkable formation, his soliloquy was interrupted by the arrival of Bertie, who, not in the least concerned with what lay below, brought the unwelcome news that the main emergency tank had been holed. He had made a temporary repair. The cabin still reeked of petrol, but any loose spirit had run out through the holes in the floor.

"Holes in the floor!" echoed Algy, not understanding immediately. "What holes?"

"Sorry, old boy. I thought you must have heard those shots giving the keel a crack."

"I heard them strike but didn't know where. How many holes are there?"

"I've found five so far, three below the water-line. Actually I don't think

there are any more.”

“Can you fix them?”

“I can plug them, enough to keep the water out, if you’ll stay up topsides. If you put her down she’ll start to leak and the water will get in the way.”

“All right. In that case I’ll stay where I am,” declared Algy, seeing no alternative. “I’ll cruise around while you make a temporary job. Let me know when you’ve finished; and then we’ll go down and do the thing properly.”

“It’ll take some time to do that, old boy. I mean to say, if we have to float around all night, in the drink without an anchor, and a sea gets up, thing’s won’t look too good—if you get my meaning.”

Algy did get his meaning, without difficulty. Thinking swiftly, he saw, too, that if the submarine suspected they were down, and following them up caught them on the water, they would be finished. He looked at the lake. It appeared to provide the solution. There they would be safe from submarines and storm—always provided that he could get down on it safely.

But if anything went wrong, causing him to make a mess of it, that would certainly be the end. They would not be able to get down those awful cliffs to sea level and no one would be able to get up to them. Biggles would come, searching, but it was hardly likely that he would look there for them. Aware that the longer he contemplated the project the worse it would appear, he made up his mind. “I’ll put her down there,” he said, pointing.

Bertie stared. Apparently he hadn’t noticed the lake until then. “I say, old boy, that *is* something. Fancy all that beastly water stuck right up there. What you might call a proper basinfal, eh.”

“I imagine it’s the crater of an old volcano.”

“As long as it is an old one, laddie,” said Bertie dubiously. “Be no joke, though, if she started to boil up while we were sitting on her. We should be properly in the soup—if you see what I mean. In fact, we should jolly soon be soup.”

“If she blows up we shan’t know anything about it,” retorted Algy. “Get cracking on those holes. I’m burning precious petrol.”

Bertie disappeared aft.

For the best part of half an hour Algy cruised round the island, studying the lake from all angles. It was roughly circular in shape with a diameter of nearly a mile, which would have been more than ample for a landing had it not been for the surrounding walls. These walls, or cliffs, which were as sheer inside as outside, were his real worry. He would have to go in at a height sufficient to clear them, which meant that even if he cut it fine he would arrive over the water at about a hundred feet. By the time he had slipped off this height he would be half-way across, with the opposite cliffs closer than was pleasant.

However, he did not doubt his ability to get down. It was the look of the thing, and the knowledge of what failure would mean, that knitted his forehead with anxiety. He consoled himself with the thought that the actual risk was no greater than the hazards they would have to face on the open sea.

Bertie appeared. "All right, old boy," he said cheerfully. "I've done as much as I can. Let's go down."

Algy brought the big machine round, and turning into the wind began his approach. The engines died. The serrated rim of the crater, looking unpleasantly like a great row of teeth waiting to close on them, floated nearer. At close quarters they looked even more frightening than they had from a distance. He gave them as wide a margin as he dared, and once over them, sideslipped off the altitude he no longer needed, first left and then right, before straightening the machine for the touch down. The opposite cliffs were now rushing towards him. But the keel slashed the inky water with plenty of room to spare, sending the usual waves racing across the glassy surface. The flying boat surged on a little way, quickly losing speed, and presently came to rest, rocking gently, with a good hundred yards in hand.

Algy mopped imaginary perspiration from his forehead. "Well, we're in, anyway," he observed. "Let's hope we get out as easily. Now let's have a look at the damage."

"That's me," agreed Bertie. "The sooner the better. If the bottom fell out of this beastly pudding basin while we—"

"Oh shut up!" cut in Algy irritably. "We've enough on our minds without imagining such horrors. I'm worried sick about Ginger and Marcel. They're in a worse spot than we are. They've nothing to eat. How we're going to do it, I don't know, but we've got to get them and lose no time about it."

It did not take them long to ascertain the full extent of the damage done by the submarine's bullets. It was not very serious; a punctured tank and some holes in the hull; but it was obviously going to take a fair while, certainly the rest of the day, to effect such repairs as would be necessary for their peace of mind during the business of picking up the others and making the long flight home afterwards.

They had a quick lunch of jammy biscuits and then set to work, concentrating on the task, talking of nothing else, and only then when it was necessary. They had, as they knew, lost a little petrol, but not enough to worry them unduly. Bertie had of course plugged the leaks.

Long before they had finished, the sun, never high in such a latitude, had dropped behind the cliffs, resulting in an early twilight, and an eerie one. If the crater had looked sinister in the full light of day, in the gloaming it looked positively menacing. The knowledge too, that they were perched high in the air, induced an uncomfortable feeling of insecurity, although there was no practical reason for this. As Algy remarked, the lake might have been there for thousands of years, and might be there for thousands more. They were better off where they were than exposed to the caprice of the open sea.

"It's no use thinking of doing any thing about Ginger and Marcel tonight," asserted Algy. "It seems pretty awful, leaving them where they are, but there's nothing we can do and they must realise it. We shall have to try something tomorrow morning, though."

“And what will you do then?” inquired Bertie doubtfully.

Algy ducked the question. “That will need thinking about. If that infernal submarine is still in the bay, obviously we can’t land there. Already they’ve shown us how they feel about visitors.”

“Too true, laddie,” murmured Bertie. “How about waffling back to Cape Town when it gets light, borrowing a cookie or two from the Air Force, and bouncing them on their beastly iron deck?”

“I don’t think we’ve quite arrived at that stage yet,” dissented Algy.

“Besides, for all we know, Ginger and Marcel might have been captured and taken aboard.”

“If they have we can say good-bye to them,” returned Bertie, deady serious for once. “If those people are cads enough to maroon a member of their own crew, think of how they’d be likely to treat an enemy.”

“It’s better not to think about that,” answered Algy. “Anyway, I wouldn’t care to start throwing bombs about without Biggles knowing.”

“He won’t be here yet, although no doubt he’ll come out hot foot when he gets back to Cape Town and finds us missing.”

Algy looked up. “Missing? I hope we shall be there by the time he gets back. I wasn’t contemplating hanging round here for days.”

“We can’t go until we pick up Ginger and Marcel,” declared Bertie. “No jolly fear. I’m not pushing off leaving them stuck on any beastly island. We couldn’t do anything if we went to Cape Town, if it comes to that.”

“True enough,” agreed Algy, gazing at the darkening scene outside the windows, where the cliffs, looming high against the sky, created a disconcerting impression that they were at the bottom of a well.

For a little while they continued to discuss the problems facing them, but without reaching any definite conclusions or making any particular plans for the morrow.

Nothing could in fact be done, insisted Algy, until they had located the submarine, or at any rate ascertained that it was no longer in Deliverance Bay. If it had gone there would be nothing to worry about. They would simply have to land, pick up the others and return to Cape Town.

They had, of course, no reason to suppose that there was anyone on Hog Island apart from the submarine crew.

“Meanwhile, we’re all right where we are,” concluded Algy, trying to strike an optimistic note. “The only thing is, it seems to be getting pretty chilly.” He went nearer to the window, and staring out, discovered that he could no longer see the cliffs. He passed a hand over the perspex, which in some curious way appeared to have become suddenly opaque. Then the truth hit him. Turning, he met Bertie’s eyes. “There was one weather condition we forgot when we parked ourselves here,” he said slowly. “And it happens to be the only one that could keep us grounded.”

Bertie stared back. “What’s that?”

“Fog,” answered Algy. “It’s like pea-soup outside.”

BROWNE OFF

ON Hog Island, Ginger and Marcel kept watch until total darkness put an end to a miserable task and a miserable day.

Conditions were not much better in the dugout, into which they retired, still not knowing how many men were on the island or where they were located. Ginger thought anyone on the island would be at Deliverance Bay, with the submarine, but he had to agree with Marcel that the submarine might have gone away submerged, in which case they would not see it go; and whether it had gone or not, the man they had seen might have returned to his dwelling, wherever and whatever that might be. It was all very unsatisfactory, and Ginger, listening to the eternal lapping of the waves far below them, found himself wondering how Robinson had endured months of this sort of thing, in solitude, without doing away with himself or going mad. He had matches in his pocket, and he would have risked a fire had there been anything to burn. The darkness seemed to make the cold more intense. He broke off a piece of wood from the roof, but it was rotten and sodden, and as fuel quite useless. He saw that he might as well try to light a wet clod.

For what seemed an eternity they huddled against each other, hands in their pockets, in the greatest possible discomfort, seldom speaking. Ginger, of course, wondered where Algy was and what he was doing; but not all the wondering in the world would answer the question. It was still only Thursday, he recalled, and should Algy not come, it was no use looking for Biggles until Sunday. It seemed unbelievable that what had promised to be a simple reconnaissance could have so quickly come to a disastrous ending.

After a while he said: "I can't stand any more of this. I'm going to see if the submarine is still there. If it is, it'll be on the surface and there should be lights showing."

"Are you an imbecile?" came back Marcel's voice from the darkness. "If you do not walk into the sea you will fall on the rocks and break your bones."

"Anything is better than sitting here and doing nothing," declared Ginger desperately. "You wait here. If you hear me whistle, answer, because it will mean that I've lost my way. If you hear me screaming, come fast with your pistol, because not expecting anything like this, I didn't bring mine, and it may mean that someone is cutting my throat."

"The trouble with you Englishmen is, you cannot sit still," stated Marcel. "If things are bad, you are happy, because then you have something to make you rush about. If things are good, you must still make a reason to rush about. So always you are getting cracking as you say. Go and crack. All you will crack tonight is your skull, my friend."

"I'm not likely to do any rushing, believe you me," asserted Ginger. "I

shan't be long."

In spite of Marcel's protests, and the fact that he knew he was doing a foolish thing, he left the dugout and stood for a moment or two staring into the surrounding gloom. Actually, it was not quite as black as he expected. Along the southern horizon there flickered an eerie blue light, which he took to be the Aurora Australis, the Antarctic equivalent of the Northern Lights. The reflection on the sky enabled him at least to see the silhouette of any rising ground. He had to memorise the outlines in his immediate vicinity so that he would know the positions of the dugout when he returned. Satisfied that he had done this, he began to move forward, very cautiously, feeling his way a step at a time. He could not recall seeing any particularly dangerous obstacle. Confidence grew as he advanced without encountering any serious difficulty, and stopping sometimes to look back for landmarks to guide him on his return, he pressed on.

It was a strange, unreal sensation, this night sortie over ground which few feet could have trodden, and he began to derive from it that feeling of elation that comes from braving the unknown. That is not to say that he was making the journey from mere whim or bravado. He was really anxious to know if the submarine was still there, for their fate might well depend on how long it stayed.

Topping the ultimate ridge his question was answered. It was still in the bay. He could not actually see the vessel, but he could see a steady yellow glow which looked as if it might be light coming from an open conning tower. He did not expect to find it carrying regulation riding lights. For a little while he stood watching, regretting that the water was too cold for swimming, or he would have considered pursuing his investigations closer.

As nothing seemed to be happening on the ship he turned his back on it and started to retrace his steps, satisfied that he had achieved his object. Again he experienced less difficulty than he expected; or so he thought. At all events, it had not occurred to him that he might have strayed when, from a slight eminence, he was dumbfounded to see, only a little way in front of him in a hollow, a row of three small square lights that were obviously windows.

To say that he was shaken would be to put it mildly. He was flabbergasted, not only by the fact that the lights were there, but by the knowledge that he had lost his way.

Recovering somewhat, he perceived that there was, after all, nothing really remarkable about the lights. He had known that there was someone on the island. This, obviously, was where the man—or possibly men—lived. He took a tentative step forward intending to have a closer look, but finding that the ground fell away sharply, and was composed of loose stuff that began to rattle down when disturbed, he desisted, and decided that instead of taking chances that were clearly outrageous he would be better advised to try to find his way back to the dugout.

It took him some time. Indeed, it seems doubtful if he would have found

his way back before daylight had not Marcel eventually come to his rescue. A match flared in the darkness. Ginger went flat, thinking it might be men from the submarine. Then he heard someone whistling the Marseillaise, and knowing that it could only be Marcel, he sent out an answering whistle, using the same tune. Another match blazed like a torch in the darkness and the rest was easy. He was not, after all, very far from the dugout. Marcel, using matches recklessly, lighted the way in.

Safely inside, the look he gave Ginger was anything but congratulatory.

"Are you mad?" he demanded belligerently. "Is this a place to wander by night, losing yourself and leaving me alone to find your body in the morning pecked to pieces by birds?"

"Sorry, Marcel," answered Ginger contritely. "Yes, I did lose my way, but I've discovered something."

"The submarine is still there, yes?"

"Yes. But that isn't all. There's a house, or a building of some sort. I've seen the lights of the windows."

"Ah!" breathed Marcel. "So these pirates have the nerves to build houses on the property of France. Tomorrow, my friend, we will pull them down. They shall not get away with this."

"I wouldn't be in a hurry to pull them down," answered Ginger. "For one thing they might object, and for another, we might be glad of a roof over our heads before we've finished with this perishing island."

"That is true," admitted Marcel sadly. "We should have brought with us bombs and machine guns."

"It's a bit late to think of that," replied Ginger. Then, sitting in the darkness he went on to describe in detail what he had seen.

For a little while he talked about it, and at the end agreed that there was nothing more they could do until daylight came. After that they fell silent and spent the rest of the night dozing fitfully. In such discomfort anything like real sleep was impossible, and Ginger was able for the first time to appreciate fully the sort of existence Robinson must have led. How he had survived was now a bigger mystery than ever.

Dawn came at last, creeping, reluctantly it seemed, through a blanket of bone-chilling mist that reduced visibility to not much more than a hundred yards. There had been a sharp drop in temperature and the ground had that grey look about it that comes from near-freezing. The breeze had died away altogether and the sea was a flat, oily calm.

Ginger gazed at the weather in dismay. If it wasn't wind it was fog, he brooded, as he buffed his arms to restore the circulation of his numbed limbs. A wind would disperse the fog, but probably blow up a nasty sea. They couldn't have it both ways.

"If we look like being here for another night I'm going to collect some driftwood and light a fire," he told Marcel. "I don't care who sees it. Anything is better than sitting here in the dark, freezing to death slowly."

Marcel shrugged. "We shall be here while there is fog," he said in a resigned voice. "How can Algy find the island if he cannot see it? No, this is not possible. He would be mad to try. And now my stomach begins to cry aloud for food. What shall we eat?"

"Whether we eat or not is up to us," averred Ginger. "If there are people living on this island, then there must be food; and if there is food I'm jolly well going to get some of it."

"Pah! Do you think these people will give you food?"

"No. So what? I'll tell you. We'll help ourselves," declared Ginger trenchantly. "But before we start anything, I suggest we have a look to see if the sub looks like pushing off. I imagine it won't stay longer than is necessary. If it goes it should make things a lot easier for us."

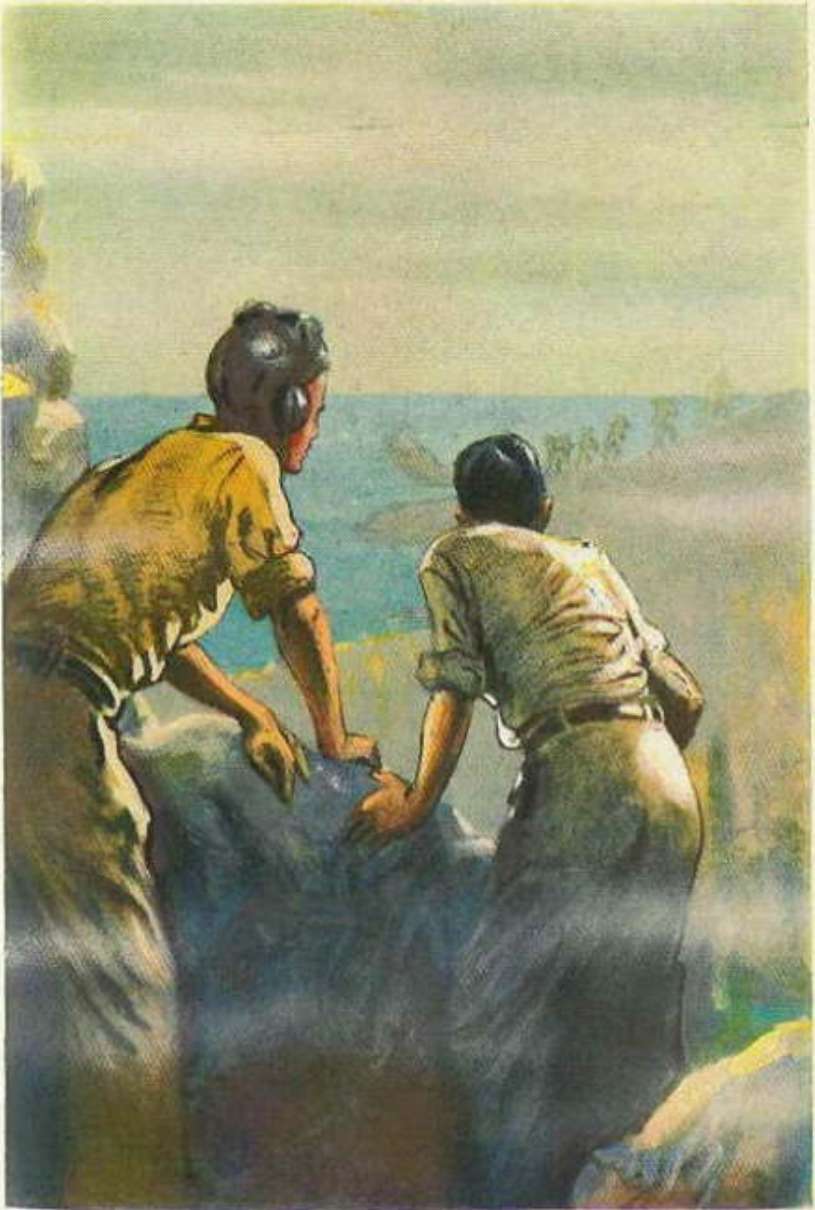
Marcel agreed, so they set off, proceeding with the caution the circumstances demanded.

They had not gone far when sounds ahead, voices and the tramp of boots on hard ground, sent them scurrying to cover, of which there was plenty available. Crouching behind a rock, they remained silent while a file of six men in dark uniforms emerged from the mist. Each carried a heavy burden, a bag or a box. They went on, to disappear again in the direction of the place where the snared rabbit had been found. Ginger had already decided that it was in this area that he had seen the lighted windows. He noted that the mist seemed to be lifting a trifle.

"It's plain to see what those men are doing," he told Marcel, as they resumed. "They were carrying stores, either for the chap who we know is already here, or for a garrison that is on its way. I reckon that when they've done that, they'll push off. I hope so, anyway."

They went on, more quickly now, and arriving at the ridge that overlooked the bay, saw, as they expected, the submarine still there. But it was not in its original position. With several of the crew on deck it was moving slowly across the mouth of the bay. A boat had been pulled up on the gently shelving rock on which they themselves had landed, presumably the one used by the men who had gone ashore.

"What the dickens are they doing?" muttered Ginger gazing at the submarine. "They seem to be chucking something overboard."



“What the dickens are they doing?”
(See page 94)

The voice of the officer in charge of the working party reached them clearly, but of course they did not know what he was saying.

“Perhaps they dump their rubbish after a long journey,” suggested Marcel.

“Could be,” conceded Ginger. “But that’s all we wanted to see. We’d better not stay here any longer in case that shore party comes back.”

Watching ahead for danger, they retired for some distance; to the place, in fact, where they had hidden on the way out. Farther they dared not go for fear of meeting the men coming back. They waited for about twenty minutes, when the sailors, no longer burdened, marched past on their way back to the ship. There was another difference.

Instead of six men there were now seven. The seventh man, a big, bearded figure in a blue jeisey and sea-boots, marched beside the leader, Ginger recognised him for the man they had seen earlier.

“That fellow must live here,” he whispered to Marcel.

“But now he goes away with the submarine, perhaps.”

“I doubt it. I fancy he’s a sort of caretaker and stays here all the time. It looks as if he’s on his way to the bay. Now’s the time to look for his quarters. We might be able to lay our hands on some food. There’s bound to be plenty. We’ll never get another chance as good as this if it’s discovered that we are here.”

They went forward, hurrying now, prepared to take almost any risk in order to deal with their most urgent problem, which was food, for they were, of course, now desperately hungry. They did not have far to go. A little beyond the spot where the rabbit had been found, the ground dropped into a small hollow; and there, sitting snugly at the bottom, was a long low hutment of the Nissen type. That is to say, the roof and sides, of corrugated iron, semi-circular in shape, were in one piece. Inset were three small windows, or skylights, and at one end a chimney from which a little smoke was issuing. Supported between two poles was a wireless aerial. A pile of driftwood lay near.

“This is the place I saw last night,” asserted Ginger. “Let’s go down.”

“There may be someone inside,” replied Marcel doubtfully.

“We’ll look and see. We must have food or starve, and this is our chance. The door’s shut. If anyone was there it would probably be open. You keep watch and warn me if you see anyone coming.”

“*Entendu.*” Marcel drew his pistol and took up a position as far below the top of the bank as would allow him to see over it.

Ginger half walked, half slid to the bottom and hastened to the nearest window. It was set rather high, but by standing on tiptoe he could see inside. The room was nearly filled with a clutter of furniture, but it was primarily a sitting-room, he thought. The bundles and boxes brought by the sailors were piled in the middle. Apart from a table and chair there seemed to be some office equipment. A T-square rested on a sloping drawing-board. It was really this extra equipment that caused the congestion. Not daring to waste any more time there, Ginger went on to the next window. The room was obviously a bedroom, so he went on to the third, which revealed itself to be a kitchen, although it was obviously used as well as a living-room. There was an iron

stove. There were boxes and cartons round the walls. At the far end there was a back door. He went to it. It opened to his touch. He entered, to be greeted by the warm, homely smell of food and tobacco.

He went to work with almost feverish activity. The boxes, as he had thought, contained food, mostly in cans. Exactly what these contained he did not know unless the label illustrated the contents, as sometimes happened, for the wording conveyed nothing. Finding one box empty he used it as a receptacle and began filling it, helping himself at random from a wide variety of tins, bags and jars, to make sure of getting something useful. As soon as he had such a load as he could carry comfortably, he went out, and scrambling up the slope, joined Marcel, who was still mounting guard. "Grab some of that firewood and let's get out of this," he said tersely. Without waiting he shouldered his bundle and set off, feeling somewhat like a fugitive after having committed a burglary. Presently Marcel, staggering under a load of driftwood, overtook him. He was laughing. "Name of a dog!" he chuckled. "I am paid to stop people from doing this."

Ginger grinned. "Let's get home with the swag."

It was still misty, but not as thick as it had been. Peering ahead, and stopping sometimes to listen for footsteps, they hurried on, Ginger fearful lest something should go wrong at the last minute. But the luck held. Only just. For looking out after dropping their loads in the dugout, they saw the man in the blue jersey striding purposefully back towards this hut.

"I call that great work," panted Ginger, sitting down on his box. "Let's see what we've got."

An exclamation brought him round. Marcel was pointing. Following his finger, Ginger saw the submarine, travelling on the surface, just disappearing into the mist.

"She goes!" cried Marcel. "*Bon!*"

"Yes, that's fine," agreed Ginger. "Apparently she's completed her job here. For one thing we know she brought fresh stores for the chap who lives here. I'm pretty sure now that he must be a sort of caretaker. The submarine was doing something in the bay, too. I can't think what it could have been. They seemed to be chucking something overboard. I wonder..." His voice trailed away and his expression changed suddenly. "By gosh! I've just had a horrible idea."

Marcel raised his eyebrows.

"I wonder could she have been—no, it couldn't be that..."

"Be what?"

"The awful thought struck me that she might have been laying mines across the entrance to the bay."

Marcel's expressive face registered horror. For a moment he didn't answer. Then, very slowly, he said: "It is possible."

Ginger shook his head. "No, they'd never do a dastardly thing like that. A whaler, or any sort of ship, might run here for shelter in dirty weather."

“They saw the flying-boat,” said Marcel. “Perhaps they think she comes back, so they blow her up.”

“That’s a nasty thought, but you may be right,” returned Ginger in a strained voice. “Algy will come back. Even if he doesn’t, Biggles will. We’d better go and look at this.”

He sprang up. “Food will have to wait. This murk is lifting. Algy might show up at any time.”

They ran most of the way to the bay. The water lay flat, without a mark on it except one or two oil stains. Marcel breathed a sigh of relief.

“Nothing.”

“The tide’s coming in, and there’s a big rise and fall here,” Ginger pointed out. “To be any use here, mines would have to be moored. At anything but low tide they might be under water.”

“If they are under water a flying-boat couldn’t hit one,” said Marcel. “The plane is not like a ship, with a deep keel.”

“That’s true,” conceded Ginger. “But I still have a feeling that this place isn’t safe any longer.”

Marcel lifted an expressive shoulder. “What can we do about it?”

“That’s what I was wondering,” replied Ginger. “As far as I can see, if Algy comes all we can do is wave to him to keep clear—I mean, land somewhere else.” From his tone of voice it was evident that he himself was doubtful as to how far this would prove successful in practice. “Let’s go and get some food,” he concluded. “We’ll bring it here to eat it. In this still air we ought to bear an aircraft long before it gets here.”

“What about the man who lives here? He will know someone has been robbing his house.”

“Not necessarily, unless he keeps count of everything he uses. I think he’s more likely to be busy sorting out the fresh supplies. Anyway, if he comes looking for trouble, I’m in the mood to let him have it. Let’s fetch some grub. I’m one big aching void inside.”

Turning away, they walked briskly towards the dugout.

OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN

ON the elevated lake that occupied most of the centre of Penguin Island, Algy and Bertie awoke, cold and thoroughly uncomfortable, to find the fog still pressing like a curtain against the side windows of the cabin.

Algy was first on his feet, trying by vigorous exercise to generate some warmth in his chilled body. "Ugh!" he shivered. "Isn't it perishing cold! Get up and dance, and help me to work up a fug." He stopped suddenly, staring at Bertie, whose monocled eye was regarding him without enthusiasm from the corner of his duffle coat. Without speaking he jumped sideways to shift his weight suddenly. The aircraft did not respond. He might have been standing on a concrete floor. Very deliberately he walked to the cabin door, opened it and looked out. When he turned, the colour and expression of his face brought Bertie to a sitting position.

"What is it, old boy?" asked Bertie anxiously. "I mean to say, are you ill or something?"

"I'm very ill indeed," answered Algy grimly. "My stomach has fallen out. So will yours when you look outside."

"Fog?"

"Oh yes, there's plenty of that," answered Algy. "There's something else, too. Ice. We're frozen in."

"Frozen!"

"That's what I said. I thought there was a queer solid feeling about the ship. The lake is ice from bank to bank. There must have been a few degrees of frost in the night. I don't think the ice can be very thick yet, but it will go on getting thicker while the frost persists. We ought to be kicked for not taking into account the possibility of it."

"But here, I say, hold hard," protested Bertie, moving with alacrity. "Why should we have thought of it? According to the Pilot Book the sea doesn't freeze as far north as this."

"The sea," replied Algy with deadly calm, "is brine. This lake is rain water—fresh water. We knew that. If you'd ever been to school you'd know that fresh water freezes more readily than salt. And another thing. The sea is always on the move. This lake is as stagnant as a duck pond. Finally, it is a thousand feet higher than the sea, and that, in a climate like this, can make a lot of difference. I must have been out of my mind to step into such a trap. Of all the places on earth to get stuck—"

"Now wait a minute, old boy," broke in Bertie. "Let's see how bad things are before we start tearing ourselves off a strip."

Together they stood at the cabin door and gazed at the grey skin of ice that now covered the surface of the water for as far as they could see.

Nothing moved anywhere. There was not even a gull in sight. An aching silence seemed to hang in the air.

"How perfectly disgusting," murmured Bertie. He fetched a boat-hook and found he had no difficulty in breaking the ice, which turned out to be not more than an eighth of an inch thick. "Not too bad, laddie," he observed cheerfully. "The old barge should be able to shake herself free. I bet she doesn't like it any more than we do."

"It'll get thicker all the time the frost lasts."

"Then let's slide off before we're fixed."

"We're fixed already," answered Algy. "Or are we? Let's see. If we break the ice all round, the engines might pull us clear. But even so, we couldn't spare the petrol to go on cruising up and down waiting for a thaw."

"Why waste time doing that? Why not take her off?"

"What, in this fog?"

Actually, Algy realised well enough that their only chance was to get off right away; but the thought of a blind take-off, knowing what was around him, turned him colder than he already was. Moreover, he wondered what effect the ice would have on the hull, for the conditions were something outside even his wide experience. Some of the ice would certainly stick to the hull, and the drag caused by it might well affect the machine's performance. The only thing to do, he decided, was to put the matter to the test. Obviously, they couldn't stay where they were. The possibility of being frozen in for an indefinite period didn't bear thinking about.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," he said to Bertie. "For a start we'll break all the ice we can reach. Then, if we can get the ship moving, we'll use her as an ice-breaker and cut a track from one side of the lake to the other. The stuff is very thin and shouldn't hurt her. Scrape off some paint, maybe. A track of open water would serve as a guide for direction, too. Of course, if a lot of ice sticks to the hull it'll make her sluggish, and then we've had it. There's no wave to give us a kick off, and I've got to clear the cliff. The dickens of it is, we've no way of knowing the position of the lowest part. That's where we saw the waterfall. I'm dashed if I know where that is now."

"There is this about it, old boy. We're lightly loaded."

"Thank goodness for that," muttered Algy. "With anything like a load we wouldn't have a hope. If I can get her off, I'll put her down on the sea and let the salt water melt off any ice that sticks to her. In this still air the sea must be dead calm, so there shouldn't be much difficulty about that."

"As long as we can see it. This fog doesn't seem to be getting any thinner."

"I don't think it's likely to, either. We're in a frost hole. Any fog that rolls in can't get out. Coming in contact with the ice it isn't likely to rise. I've got an idea that visibility may be better if only we can get out of this glorified soup bowl. Let's get cracking. Breakfast will have to wait."

They started forthwith on the task of breaking the ice round the aircraft, at the same time chipping off any pieces that stuck to the hull. This took a little

time although the business was simplified before the end by the aircraft, which, from the movement on board, helped to free itself. They were glad to note that the broken ice did not refreeze at once, as they were afraid it might. As soon as the machine was behaving normally, Algy started the engines, and found to his relief that once a little forward speed was gained the aircraft crunched her way through the ice without difficulty, although the noise that resulted was alarming until they became accustomed to it.

Algy ploughed on from the position in which the machine had passed the night until the cliff loomed up in front of him. Then, turning about, he retraced his track which, as the ice was broken, could be plainly seen.

Reaching the end of it he carried straight on, now breaking fresh ice, holding the machine as straight as possible until the opposite side of the crater appeared. He went right up to it before turning, in order to give himself the maximum run possible. As there was no wind the direction of the take-off didn't matter.

When the operation was complete the Sunderland was facing the track it had made, and dead in line with it. All this time Bertie sat in the second pilot's seat. Neither spoke. There was nothing to be said. Both knew that somewhere ahead, invisible in the white fog into which the track of broken ice disappeared, rose the cliffs which, should they fail to clear them, would smash the machine to splinters. Should that happen they would disappear without trace, and neither Biggles nor anyone else would ever know what had become of them. They would join the end of the long list of unsolved air mysteries.

Algy knew there could be no question of a trial run. Either the machine would clear the cliff or it would not. If it wouldn't, nothing was to be gained by waiting. His sensations were those of a diver on a high board. The sooner the ordeal was over the better, he resolved. Gently, but deliberately, he opened all four engines wide. The Sunderland surged forward, gathering speed, faster—faster—faster, rushing as it seemed to destruction. There could be no stopping. Nothing could be seen except about thirty yards of track, at which distance it merged into the fog.

Algy was conscious chiefly of noise. Above the bellow of the engines, to which he was of course accustomed, arose such a din of cracking and splintering as might have been made by a thousand panes of breaking glass. Particles of ice struck the aircraft like a hail of machine-gun bullets. Ice and spray together whirled past the side windows. But the terrifying noise, he realised in a subconscious sort of way, came from the whole frozen surface of the lake breaking as it was up lifted by waves made by the passage of the aircraft through the water. He hadn't thought of that.

His face was expressionless as his eyes stared down the track. He was mentally counting the passing seconds, the only means he had of judging the distance he had covered. His lips became a thin tight line as he eased the control column back a little. The aircraft raised herself a trifle but did not unstick. The noise of breaking ice diminished somewhat. Still counting, he

knew that he had reached the limit of his run. He could still see nothing but he knew that he must be near the cliff. He didn't want to see it, for that would mean that he had left it too late. It was now or never.

With a sudden movement he dragged the control column back into his stomach. The nose came up. The noise of breaking ice ended abruptly. Only the engines roared as the airscrews clawed their way towards the unseen sky.

For a full minute Algy continued to climb as steeply as he dared. Then his straining nerves relaxed. Knowing that he must have cleared the cliffs he levelled out. He never saw them. Neither, it transpired presently, did Bertie, which could only mean that they had cleared them by a good margin.

"Jolly good show, old boy," said Bertie calmly. He patted the side of the cockpit as if it might have been a horse. "Well done, old lady."

Below, now, the sea could be seen through a faint mist, and Algy observed, with still more relief, that his prediction had been correct. Outside the crater the fog was nothing like as thick as it had been inside. The water was as near dead calm as he had ever seen it in that stormy region.

"I'm going down," he announced. "Salt water should clear away any ice left on the keel. It won't go while I cruise about. Besides, I don't want to bump into one of the other islands. I don't really know where they are, and I shan't know until this stuff clears a bit." He smiled. "What do you think of that take-off? Wasn't it a shocker?" With his engines idling, Algy began gliding towards the water.

"Don't ever mention that take-off again," requested Bertie, affecting a shudder. Suddenly he started up. "Look out!" he cried. "There's that beastly sub!"

Algy just caught a glimpse of the submarine straight ahead, deck awash, apparently in the act of submerging, as he put the machine in a steep turn away from it. In a flash it had been swallowed up in the fog. "I'd say they heard us, and were trying to escape being seen," he remarked.

"That's about it," agreed Bertie.

"I'm glad we spotted it," said Algy. "Now we know she's left Hog Island we can get in the bay—that's if we can find it." Going on down he made a perfect landing on the smooth water and the flying-boat came quietly to rest. "Well, we're down, anyway," he resumed, sitting back and taking a deep breath. "Phew! I shan't forget that take-off in a hurry."

"Same as you, old boy, same as you," murmured Bertie. "What about a cuppa while we're waiting for this stuff to clear? I think there's a Thermos left."

"Then let's have it," assented Algy. "I need something after that spot of lunatic aviation. If this fog doesn't clear we shall have to go home and come back tomorrow. There's nothing we can do while it lasts. I've no idea of the direction of Hog, and I don't feel inclined to waffle about looking for it in a district where one can bump into rocks up to five thousand feet."

The position in which Algy found himself needs little explanation. He

knew that he must still be among the islands of the Crozet group, so it would have been a fairly simple matter to set a course for Cape Town. But not knowing his position in the group, with visibility limited to a few hundred yards, he couldn't hope to locate any particular island without a risk of colliding with one of them. Had the islands been low in the water it would have been a very different matter. The danger lay in the abnormal height they rose—for small islands—above sea level, and the fact that the tops would be heavily shrouded in mist. Clouds and fog will always cling to high ground until a wind rises to tear them away. Having so recently escaped one peril he had no desire to engage in another.

He joined Bertie in the cabin and gulped two or three cups of tea thankfully. They also had a meal of biscuits and sardines.

It was noon before the mist had cleared sufficiently to give a reasonable chance of finding Hog Island without colliding with any of its neighbours. Visibility appeared to be about half a mile, although with nothing tangible in view it was not easy to assess it exactly. Algy did not think it would get any better, and might easily get worse as the sun began to go down.

Wherefore he resolved to make his bid to get in touch with the others without further loss of time. That they must by this time be in a bad way from cold and hunger, he did not doubt.

He cruised round for about ten minutes before he spotted a mass of rock which he recognised as East Island, one of the four largest. This gave him a line, and in a few minutes the Sunderland was circumnavigating Hog Island looking for Deliverance Bay.

Having found it, the familiar figures of Ginger and Marcel could be seen on the shelving rocks, waving furiously.

"They seem to be mighty glad to see us," remarked Algy, smiling at the antics of those on the ground.

"They seem to have gone off their rockers," observed Bertie. "No doubt they're overjoyed to see us, and all that, but it isn't like either of them to throw handsprings about it. Just having fun, I suppose—if you see what I mean."

Algy brought the big machine round slowly for its approach, heading directly into the bay and concentrating on what he was doing; but out of the corner of his eye he could still see Ginger and Marcel indulging in what seemed the wildest transports of delight.

Ginger was waving his handkerchief with what seemed an unnecessary amount of energy. Only at the last moment did it occur to Algy that there might be some purpose in this unusual display, but there was no time to think about it. That there was any definite danger threatening never crossed his mind. Possibly the presence of Ginger and Marcel standing in plain view had something to do with that. Anyway, even had his suspicions been aroused it is unlikely that he would have guessed the truth, or acted differently from what he did.

The Sunderland went right in, engines idling. The keel kissed the water, recoiled a little, touched again... again... and then skimmed on to complete what Algy had every reason to suppose was going to be a well judged landing. And so it would have been had nothing occurred to interrupt it.

The information that something was wrong was conveyed in a tremendous explosion somewhere behind the flying-boat. That, really, was all Algy knew about it, and thereafter the control of the aircraft was out of his hands. A blast of air, or a wave of water, or both, struck the machine from behind with such force that had she not been on the water she might well have somersaulted. As it was, her tail was lifted and she struck her nose so deep that Algy thought they were going straight under. Maybe the machine's inherent buoyancy saved her, but not before Algy's view had been blotted out by a cloud of spray that for a moment smothered the cabin windows. Then, before he had time to begin to wonder what had happened, the aircraft was lifted by an unseen force and carried on by it towards the sloping shelves of rock on which Ginger and Marcel were standing.

Algy saw them turn and run for their lives. Seeing what was going to happen, all he could do was switch off and brace himself for the shock of collision. Actually, when it came, it was not as bad as he expected it to be. For a moment he experienced the dreadful sensation of landing a flying-boat on dry land. Then the wave on which the machine was riding collapsed in a welter of foam, depositing the aircraft, as if it had been an empty packing-case, on the formations of rock which earlier they had casually called a natural slipway.

There was a sickening jolt as the Sunderland grounded, to be followed immediately by a series of scraping bumps as it was dragged back a little way by the receding wave. Then it was all over. White and dazed, Algy looked to left and right to see that the machine had finished on even keel, and if not literally high and dry, certainly out of the water.

Ginger and Marcel came racing back.

Algy looked at Bertie. "What the deuce was that?"

"I don't know, but whatever it was, it was a dirty trick," answered Bertie in a voice pitched high with indignation. Then a smile spread slowly over his face. "I say, you know, what a day we're having." He shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid this jolly old flying game isn't what it used to be. But then, everything's going to pot."

Algy threw off his safety belt. "Never mind everything going to pot," he returned bitterly. "We seem to be doing our best to knock a perfectly good aircraft to bits."

AVIATION THE HARD WAY

A FEW minutes crisp conversation with Ginger was enough for Algy to grasp what must have happened.

“Did you know that mine was there?” he demanded, realising that the explosion could not have been caused by anything else.

“I didn’t know it, but I thought the submarine had been up to some devilment. I suspected mines.”

“I saw nothing,” declared Algy. “There wasn’t a speck on the water when I came in, or I must have seen it. I certainly didn’t touch anything.”

“We couldn’t see anything on the water, either. We looked.” Ginger made a gesture of resignation. “We did all we could to warn you to keep clear in case anything was wrong, but you took no notice.”

“Couldn’t you have made some sort of signal?”

Ginger’s voice rose a tone. “Make a signal? I was Morsing as hard as I could with my nose rag. I’d nothing else to use.”

“All right, take it easy. I’m not blaming you,” replied Algy. “How was I to guess what you were doing? Mines were the last thing I would be likely to think about.”

“We thought you were dancing for joy, old boy,” Bertie told Ginger, polishing his monocle.

“Joy! Well there’s been precious little joy on this heaven-forsaken dump, I can tell you,” asserted Ginger bitterly.

“I can’t make out why I didn’t see that mine,” said Algy, shaking his head.

“The tide’s flowing,” Ginger pointed out. “The mine would naturally be moored, and if it was laid at low water it would probably be covered at high tide.”

Enlightenment dawned in Algy’s eyes. “What are we arguing about? I’ve got the answer. Those dirty dogs must have laid a string of magnetic mines on the bottom, across the mouth of the only harbour here, to stop anyone else from getting in.”

“But mines would stop them from using the place, too,” put in Bertie.

“Not necessarily. After all, they’d know where they had put the infernal things. The sickening part of it all is, there was really no need for me to come into the bay. With the sea as it is, I could have picked you up anywhere. Magnetic mines! I’m sure that’s it. It would explain why I got away with it instead of being blown sky-high. I must have been travelling fairly fast when I went over the one I set off, and the few seconds delay before it actually exploded gave me time to get clear. The wave it made overtook me and did this.” He nodded towards the machine. “It’s time we had a look to see how much damage has been done.”

“We shall never get her back on the water, anyway—at least, not without someone or something to tow her off,” asserted Ginger.

“I don’t know about that,” answered Algy. “There may be a way. This pumice stone stuff isn’t very hard.” He struck it with his heel to prove it. “No doubt it’s dented the hull a bit and perhaps scraped the metal skin up, but I don’t think it’s made a hole. Full flood tide might reach her, and even if it didn’t float her off, might lift her enough for us to get rollers under her.”

“Rollers? Where are you going to get rollers from here?” asked Ginger, mildly sarcastic. “There isn’t a tree on the island.”

The question remained unanswered, for at this juncture a warning exclamation from Marcel caused all heads to turn the way he was looking.

The bearded man in the blue jersey was standing on the ridge looking at them. Seeing that he was observed, he turned on his heel and disappeared.

“Who on earth was that?” cried Algy, in a voice stiff with astonishment.

Ginger told him.

Up to this time the conversation had naturally been confined entirely to the aircraft and the cause of the disaster. Ginger now related all he knew about the man, which provided sound reasons for supposing that he was acting in the manner of a resident caretaker. “We pinched some of his grub,” said Ginger grinning. “He had more than he needed. He’s fixed up very comfortably with wireless and everything.”

“Wireless?”

“You’d expect him to have wireless, wouldn’t you? If ever a place needed a set, it’s here.”

“Yes, but not to listen to Housewives’ Choice,” declared Algy grimly.

“What do you mean?”

“He’ll be in touch with that submarine by radio, that’s what I mean. I’ll bet he’s calling it at this very minute to tell the commander that we’re here.”

Ginger looked alarmed. “I never thought of that.”

“Did he know you were here before this?” asked Algy.

“I don’t think so. In fact, I’m pretty sure he didn’t. I imagine he heard the explosion and came along to see what had happened.”

“Listen, everybody!” ordered Algy sharply. “I take a dim view of this. That submarine can’t be far away. If this chap on the island sends out an SOS it’s likely to turn back.”

“And if it does, what can we do about it?” inquired Ginger helplessly.

“I’ve no idea,” admitted Algy.

“Even if we got the machine afloat, we can’t take off over a minefield.”

“We certainly can’t do anything while it’s high and dry.”

“It’s no use waiting for Biggles,” interposed Bertie. “Today is only Friday and he couldn’t get here before Sunday.”

“I wasn’t thinking of anything beyond stopping this bloke talking to the submarine. Is he alone here?”

“As far as we know,” answered Ginger.

“Then as there are four of us, there shouldn’t be any difficulty in silencing his radio,” stated Algy purposefully. “We’ve guns in the locker. Get them out somebody and we’ll attend to this right away.”

Ginger hastened aboard the stranded aircraft, and returning, handed everyone an automatic with spare clips of bullets.

“I take it you know the way to this place?” Algy asked Ginger.

“Yes.”

“Then let’s get weaving. Lead the way.”

“If he becomes haughty, I will arrest him,” said Marcel severely. “He lives here without permission. He cannot do that.”

“He seems to be doing it, anyway,” murmured Ginger.

Marcel frowned his disapproval of this levity.

“Which reminds me,” went on Ginger, “his wireless aerial is mounted on a couple of poles. Those poles would come in handy to help move the machine. By the way, what happened to you?” he asked Algy as they strode along.

“You’d never guess. We were hit by gunfire and came down on a lake on Penguin Island. I’ll tell you about it later. There’s no time now.”

They continued to move forward together making no attempt to keep out of sight, Algy observing that it seemed unlikely that the man, seeing the odds against him, would put up any active resistance. But in this he was mistaken, for no sooner had they appeared on the edge of the hollow than a shot and the whistle of a bullet sent them diving for cover.

“He must have been watching, guessing we’d follow him,” said Ginger.

“It’d serve him right if we turned his tin roof into a colander,” muttered Algy angrily. “A man who would shoot like that before we’d even said a word of complaint must be the lowest kind of thug.”

“Maybe that’s why he got the job, old boy,” murmured Bertie.

“You’re probably right at that,” returned Algy. “Let’s wrinkle the rascal out of it.”

“It isn’t worth the risk of somebody getting shot,” demurred Algy. “All that matters is to put that radio out of action.”

“I’ll soon do that,” volunteered Ginger. “You watch the doors, and if he starts cutting up rough let him see that other people can sling lead about.”

So saying he followed the edge of the hollow, keeping out of sight until he was level with the nearest pole. No windows overlooked that end of the hut, so feeling safe he scrambled down. At first he tried to cut the insulated connecting wire where it entered the hut, but finding he couldn’t reach it, he turned his attention to the pole, which he realised must have been imported, with the rest of the outfit, specially for the purpose. Putting his shoulder against it and using his weight he found that he could move it. This did not surprise him, for he did not think the base could be set very deep owing to the nature of the ground—a belief that was supported by a number of pieces of rock that had been stacked round it. He continued to work on it and soon had it swaying. A final effort brought the whole thing crashing down, breaking the

wires it carried as it fell. Dragging the pole behind him, he climbed out of the hollow and returned to where the others were waiting and watching. "That should spoil his reception for a bit," he remarked, with the satisfaction of a job well done. "What's the next move?"

"I'd like to speak to this man, but if he's a Russian, and speaks no language other than his own, it would be a waste of time to try," said Algy. "At least I'll give him a chance. Watch the windows for any funny stuff." Moving a little nearer he let out a hail.

There was no answer.

He called again, speaking, of course, in English. "Hi! You, down there! What's the idea of shooting at us?"

No reply.

"Either he doesn't understand, or wants us to think he doesn't, which comes to the same thing," said Algy. "Well, he's had his chance. It's seldom any use trying to make contact with these Iron Curtain merchants. Let him stew in his own juice if that's how he wants it. I'm not pining for his company. We'll deal with him later. Let's get back to the bay. We've plenty to do there. Bring that pole along some of you. It may come in handy."

Ginger and Marcel picked the thing up between them and they started on the return journey.

The first thing they noticed when they came within sight of the aircraft was that the in-coming tide had risen to a point at which it was just lapping the keel.

"Another foot or two might just do the trick," said Algy, in a tone of fresh optimism. "Even if the water doesn't come far enough up to move her, it might just lift her enough for us to slip a roller under the rear step. That would be a start. The trouble is, with no high water mark we shan't know when the tide's at full flood. No matter. Perhaps we shall be able to judge when it begins to turn. In the meantime, we'd better see what the rock has done to her." He smiled. "If she has got a hole in her, we may have to borrow that bloke's tin roof to patch it. It might keep the water out long enough for us to get off. This poor old kite is certainly going through the mill and no mistake."

"What's the good of getting her off the water if there are more mines there?" Ginger wanted to know. "Would you risk taking her off?"

"One thing at a time," requested Algy, dodging the question. "There might have been only one mine."

"You'd be daft to reckon on that."

"What about poor old Biggles, anyhow?" put in Bertie. "If he comes, and there is another mine, he may cop it properly—if you get my meaning."

"Plenty of time for that," returned Algy. "Will somebody please keep watch in case that gent in the blue sweater comes sneaking around for another pot shot."

"If he comes, I will make the pot shotting," promised Marcel, with great earnestness.

The flying-boat was examined inside and out, and all were relieved, and somewhat surprised, to find that the damage was negligible. There were two obvious reasons for this. The collapsing wave that had carried the machine ashore had not dropped her with any degree of violence, but had merely allowed her to settle down; and the soft, friable quality of the lava that formed the inner boundary of the bay—and, indeed, the bay itself. Here, as Algy remarked, they had been lucky. Had the rock been granite, basalt, or similar hard rock, it would have been a different matter. As it was, the hull had no more injury than a few dents. One side of the second ‘step’ had been crushed and in one place the metal skin had been torn a little as the aircraft was dragged by the backwash of the waves. None of these superficial marks was likely to affect the machine’s performance on the water or in the air—if she could be put back on the water. This problem, Algy repeated, was enough to go on with. The question of the mines could wait until this had been done.

The aircraft was, of course, much too heavy for them to move even with their combined efforts, but the tide was still flowing, and great hopes were held that the rise in water level would be maintained. The wireless pole was hacked into three lengths, and with some difficulty one of the pieces was pushed under the after part of the hull as it responded slightly to the movement of the water.

Then, to the dismay of everyone, the tide began to ebb. It was particularly disappointing because, as Algy contended, at that height of water one good wave would be enough to do all that was necessary.

“Look, chaps, it’s no use sitting here doing nothing,” continued Algy, as they stood watching the water falling back. “There’s no future in that. Biggles will arrive in due course, and he’ll take us off; but we must save the machine if we can. It cost a lot of money, and we’re likely to take a rap if it becomes a write-off. I believe we could chip a lot of this rock away. It’s pretty flimsy stuff. If we could knock some of it away from the rear step, for instance, it would give her a sharper tilt towards the water. Then, with a couple of rollers under her, and maybe the other used as a lever, we might be able to move her. It’s only a matter of inches. The next tide might do the rest.”

“What beats me is why the submarine laid the mines in the first place,” muttered Ginger. “I mean, how is she going to get back in the bay herself, should she want to?”

“Obviously, she doesn’t want to, laddie,” said Bertie. “I’d say she’s finished her job here.”

“As I said before, she knows where the mines are,” put in Algy. “No doubt she left herself a comfortable channel between them—and only she knows where that is, too.”

“I’d be sorry to wager on that,” averred Bertie, with unusual emphasis. “I’ve done a fair bit of yachting and I know a rip tide when I see one. Look at that scour round the rocks now the tide’s running out. She’s going like a mill-race. There’s no soft bottom here, remember. If there are mines out there, you

can take it from me that they're not going to stay in the same place." Having delivered his verdict, Bertie replaced the monocle which he had been polishing and looked round for other opinions.

None was forthcoming.

"Let's talk about mines when the time comes to deal with them," said Algy practically. "The thing is to get the ship on the water." He looked around. "I believe this confounded fog is coming down. No matter; that needn't interfere with us yet. Come on! Let's get out any tools likely to be useful and we'll see about knocking off some of this rock."

They were soon at work, and in actual practice found the lava much easier to deal with than they expected. Often it would come away in large lumps. Frequent air holes in the stuff facilitated the use of even blunt tools, which could be used as levers to prize pieces away from the keel. It was hardest on the surface where it had been exposed to the air. The deeper they went the softer it became. The effect of this was a general feeling of optimism that encouraged effort.

Algy had been right about the fog. As the day closed in it became worse, until by the time they had to knock off, being unable any longer to see what they were doing, visibility was down nearly to zero. However, a lot of work had been done, so everyone was cheerful about the prospect. Not only had the aircraft taken on a more pronounced tilt but a channel had been cut up which, it was hoped, the water would run to facilitate the task of moving the machine. The aircraft was, of course, facing the wrong way, so the engines could not be made to serve any useful purpose.

"Okay chaps, that's enough for tonight," said Algy, brushing crumbs of pumice stone from his hands. "Let's have a bite to eat. I'm afraid we shall have to mount a guard in case our unfriendly neighbour comes snooping round."

SATURDAY MORNING

GINGER'S first thought when he awoke the following morning was, it's Saturday. Biggles may come tomorrow. Thank goodness.

How Biggles would handle the situation he couldn't imagine, but they would at least have a means of getting away should it become vitally necessary. The big snag of Biggles' arrival was the certainty of him landing in the bay and possibly setting off another mine before he could be warned of the danger. How could he be warned in time? There seemed to be no answer to that question.

Going outside—for they had of course been sleeping in the cabin—to relieve Bertie, who was on guard, he found the fog as thick as ever, cold and almost choking in its clammy density. Bertie said that it was impossible to see anything at all. He had merely sat and listened for sounds that might indicate the approach of the man in the blue jersey, whose visit, should he make one, would not be inspired by good intentions. The only sound he had heard was the barking of seals.

Actually, as Ginger took up his period of guard duty he thought it extremely unlikely that the man would come, for not even he, no matter how well he knew the island, would find it easy to move about in such conditions.

After breakfast, when all hands turned out to resume work on the slipway, Algy said he shared this view. There was, he thought, nothing to fear from the man while such hopeless conditions persisted. What was more to the point, he went on, it would be interesting to see what effect their efforts would have at next high water, due about noon.

But before long it became evident that other factors were likely to take a hand. A change in the weather became perceptible. It started with a breeze that seemed inclined to freshen, and as it came from the south the biting coldness of it brought tears to their eyes. The sea was not long responding, and very soon breakers could be heard crashing on the outer exposed rocks with a good deal of noise. This must have broken their force, but even so, the effect of the swell was felt in the bay, into which waves began to roll in steady procession and sweep up the shelving ledges of rock in a smother of foam. This hindered the work, for in such perishing conditions no one wanted to get wet. All they could do was go hard at it between the waves. On the other hand, as Algy pointed out, the changed conditions might do them a good turn, in that the sea might bring more water into the bay. They were ready with the improvised rollers made from the wireless pole should the waves reach the aircraft.

The strange thing was, as someone presently remarked, the wind seemed to be having little effect on the fog, except that whereas before it had been static,

it was now being blown about in clouds of varying density. It seemed reasonable to suppose that the wind would shift the fog entirely. All that happened was, there were brief intervals when visibility extended far enough for them to see the tumbling white waters outside the bay.

Algy remarked on this phenomenon. "Where's all this muck coming from?" he muttered irritably. "There must be miles of it. This wind should have cleared it by now."

"By the feel of it, laddie, it's coming from the bally Pole," answered Bertie—nearer to the truth than he may have supposed.

"I'll tell you this," put in Ginger. "If this sea stays up, Biggles won't be able to land anywhere except in the bay."

"If this confounded murk doesn't shift, he won't be able to land anywhere," rejoined Algy grimly.

In the intervals when the in-coming water made work a wet business they stood watching the wind-torn streaks of white vapour drifting past. The waves were rolling in farther and farther up the slope as the tide neared full flood, and hopes ran high that success would reward their efforts. Presently, when a wave larger than the rest reached the hull and lifted it a little, Algy cried: "I believe we're going to do it!"

"We shall need more than one anchor to hold her if we do get her on the water," stated Bertie. "If she doesn't hold she's liable to be thrown back, or banged ashore somewhere else."

"I think you're right," agreed Algy. "We've plenty of time. Make a couple of anchors with the biggest rocks you can find. Use heavy stuff. This light pumice is no good. I want everybody to stand by to slip the rollers under her, and shove if she gets a lift. The thing is not to let her bump."

Half an hour later the waves were swirling right up the slipway, which became a scene of feverish activity. The big flying-boat was now being lifted by the water, but, as may readily be imagined, the difficulty was to prevent her from being carried farther ashore by the inwash. This could not be entirely prevented. The best they could do was hold on like grim death as the water poured in and then push like mad to take full advantage of the receding flood. This resulted in a certain amount of bumping as the aircraft surged to and fro on the rollers, which, as Algy remarked, was a lot better than direct contact with the rock. Excitement ran high when it was seen that by these efforts they could make more ground than they lost. Apart from what they themselves were doing, there were two factors in their favour. The first was the natural slope of the slipway in the right direction, which gave them gravity as an ally; the second was the channel they had hacked out of the rock down which the spent waves poured with great speed. They continued to gain ground. Everyone got wet about the legs, but this could no longer be avoided. In the frantic exertions of the moment no one appeared to notice it.

The end came suddenly and nearly caught them unprepared. In fact, they nearly lost the aircraft. An extra large wave broke under the tail unit, and in

the resulting flood lifted the machine clean off the rollers.

Everyone hung on. Then, as the water spent its force and started to surge back it took the aircraft with it. Algy, seeing what was going to happen, raced down the hull and took a flying leap into the cabin, the door of which had fortunately been left open. This time the machine did not stop, and, as it happened, there was a distinct lag before the next wave, a very small one, appeared. By that time the machine was afloat, rocking helplessly on the turbulent water and swinging about as it was carried farther by a slant of wind.

The expressions on the faces of those watching switched from elation to consternation as they realised the danger of the machine being blown against the rocky promontory that jutted out to form one side of the bay.

It was a dreadful moment. Then Algy could be seen working desperately with the anchors, and to everyone's relief the machine swung head to wind. Algy's hand went up in a signal which they took to mean that all was well.

"He ought to take her farther out," said Bertie anxiously. "If the wind blows any harder there's a chance those anchors will drag."

"If he takes her any farther out, he won't see us and we shan't see him," said Ginger.

"The wind she go down with the sun," prophesied Marcel optimistically.

"We can't have it both ways," observed Ginger tritely.

"The machine's on the water, that's the main thing. What a game we've had."

They stood watching to see what Algy would do.

"As soon as he's satisfied that she's holding, he'll come in the dinghy to fetch us," opined Bertie.

For a few seconds Ginger did not answer. He was staring out beyond the aircraft. "Did you see that?" he inquired, in a queer strained voice.

"See what, old boy?"

Ginger pointed towards the entrance of the bay. "There's an iceberg out there—a monster. At least, I think so, although I wouldn't swear to it. I just got a glimpse of it as the murk parted between gusts. You can't see it now."

Marcel snapped his fingers. "If there is ice we know why it is so cold, and why the fog stays."

"Never mind the cold," muttered Ginger, fresh alarm in his voice. "If this wind is blowing ice up from the south, how are we going to get off? And if bergs come crowding into this bay—"

"Here, hold hard!" complained Bertie. "You're frightening me to death. Did you really see a lump of beastly ice?"

"I'm pretty certain it was ice," replied Ginger. "I saw something, and I don't see how it could be anything else. It was white, but it was too angular to be a patch of fog. It looked to me like a berg, and a big one, too. I can soon settle any doubts about it." He turned. "I'll take a run to the top of that hill," he said, pointing to a dark mass that loomed dimly through the mist. "The

murk shouldn't be as thick up there as it is at sea level. I might even be able to see over the top of it, in which case I should see the top of the berg. Apparently Algy isn't coming ashore just yet, and if I'm right about this he ought to know. Shan't be long."

Without further discussion he began to run towards what he had called a hill, but was really a towering buttress of rock and loose boulders shaped something like a dog's head.

Reaching the base he started scrambling up, finding it at close quarters, as so often happens, both rougher and steeper than he had supposed. Nor could he, as he intended, take a straight line to the summit, but found it necessary to follow a winding course to get round obstacles that were plainly insurmountable. Panting, he hurried on, unwilling to turn back, yet aware that the project he had so lightly undertaken was more easily contemplated than carried out. It was obviously going to take more time than he had estimated.

He was, he thought, about three-quarters of the way up, and had stopped to look seaward in the hope of finding that it would not be necessary for him to go higher, when, observing that it was necessary and turning to resume his climb, he noticed something that struck him as odd. He stopped. On closer scrutiny it struck him as more than odd.

In the face of the curved bastion of rock that formed the brows of the dog's head, a formation of considerable size now that he was close to it, was an arrangement of rocks of different shapes and sizes that fitted together so snugly that it seemed incredible that it had occurred by mere chance. It was the fact that one of the component rocks, a narrow slab about a yard long, was standing on end, that first caught his eye. It seemed impossible that it could have fallen in such a position, and remained there, by accident. The whole thing was about six feet by four, upright, and gave the impression that a window had been filled in.

All round the sides, which were as straight as if they had been cut by a mason, the rock was solid enough; but so carefully had the inner part been filled in that even at close range it might easily have been passed unnoticed. It was the one slab of rock standing on end that called attention to it. No, Ginger told himself, this didn't just happen. Going right up to it, and looking into the thing, any doubts that might have remained were banished, for he could see chisel marks on the rocks. That settled it. The thing was artificial. Clearly, there was something behind it. What could it be?

For a minute or two he stood regarding it, his original errand forgotten, trying to guess the purpose of this strange piece of construction. Several possibilities occurred to him. Remembering the well-known sculptures on Easter Island, he wondered if it was a relic of a lost race of people who had dwelt on the island in the dim past. No, he decided, the thing didn't look all that old. On the contrary, it looked as modern as anything built of weathered rock could look. Was it a cache, a food cache perhaps, the work of a castaway? That was more like it. But why seal the place so carefully? A

treasure! Possibly, although these lonely seas had never been a hunting ground for pirates. His curiosity thoroughly aroused, Ginger decided that he could not leave the place without solving the mystery. Later, the greatest mystery of all was why he had failed to guess the right answer. It was, perhaps, one of those things that are obvious afterwards.

Starting at the top it took him a little while to remove the first stone, but after that, with an aperture in which he could insert a hand, the demolition of the wall, for that is really what it was, presented no difficulty. The removal of the first stone revealed a cavity beyond, and having enlarged it, he thrust in an arm, his hand groping. It encountered nothing, which told him that the hole, or cave, or whatever it was, was of some size. He pulled out more stones impatiently, making the opening larger, aware that his long absence might be causing anxiety to those below. Finally, he upset the tall upright stone, and that brought the whole thing down with a run, revealing in the light of day what lay beyond. Instantly the mystery was solved; the secret exposed; the purpose of the thing at once apparent.

It would not be enough to say that Ginger was surprised. He was staggered, startled and shocked, to the point where his muscles seemed to seize up, depriving him of the power of movement. Seconds ticked past, and all he could do was stare. Yet, as the initial impact of his discovery began to wear off, he could only think what a numbskull he had been not to guess the answer instantly. It was the obvious explanation. It was, in fact, the very thing they had come to the island to look for. It had been staring him in the face and he had not realised it. He could only suppose that a conviction that there was nothing of the sort there had taken root in his mind, because up to now they had seen no sign of it. Either that, or the pressing events of the past two days had put all such ideas out of his head. But there it was. Major Charles had been right—and *how* right!

Before him, in what was now plainly an embrasure, was a gun. It was no ordinary gun. It was a weird, futuristic-looking weapon, the like of which he had only seen in scientific fiction books. He went right up to it. It was obviously brand new, thick with oil, as he ascertained by touching it. Behind it, resting in an orderly row on a wooden rack, were the long, slim missiles that it fired, pointed at the nose and carrying fins at the blunt end. Rockets, Ginger told himself softly. So that was it. Rockets. He drew a deep breath.

Investigating further, he found that the gun was not mounted in a simple gun-pit, but was in a gallery that disappeared into the darkness on either hand. He could not see the end, but from the way it curved, it looked as if it might continue on right round the inside of the mass of rock; or at any rate round the front of that part of it which resembled the head of a dog. A little way along light gleamed faintly on the fittings of another gun. No doubt there were more, thought Ginger, each with its carefully camouflaged loop-hole. He would see.

Feeling for his box of matches, he set off slowly down the gallery, which from its clean-cut walls, on which the long white scars of pneumatic drills still

showed, was of recent construction. He did not go all round the bastion. He saw enough to make it clear that this long underground chamber within the natural rock was, as he had suspected, a fortification commanding the sea around it, in the manner of a miniature Gibraltar. There were several types of guns apart from the rocket, which, without knowing much about such weapons, he thought might be long-range guided missiles. Some of the ordinary guns were German types, military equipment captured during the war, he presumed. Two heavy German Mauser machine-guns, with embrasures covering different angles, puzzled him. Boxes containing belts of ammunition stood handy. He concluded that they were intended to repel an attempted landing on the island by troops or sailors in time of war. They would certainly make things hot for such an enterprise.

Deep in thought he hurried back to the entrance he had made. The deadly nature of his discovery, deadly from every point of view, dried his lips and set him trembling slightly. Here was a military secret the importance of which could hardly be estimated. The knowledge that he alone held it was almost terrifying. If the people who had installed this equipment had been hostile before, what would they do to him now if they caught him there? This question, at any rate, called for no effort to answer.

Aware of a mounting feeling of apprehension he felt that the sooner he got back to the others the happier he would be. Indeed, the desire to share his frightening knowledge with them was uppermost in his mind. Yet for a moment he hesitated. To leave the entrance as it was, broken down, would tell an unmistakable story. Would it be better to patch it up, he wondered? He could not hope to rebuild it as he had found it, but it might be possible to make it look as if the stones had subsided from natural causes. Still considering the matter, he stood motionless, just inside, staring at the square of daylight across which still hung a curtain of fog. He decided to leave it as it was. Algy could decide the question when he told him about it. He ought to get back. Already he had been away too long. The others would be wondering.

At that moment a stone, quite close, outside, rattled as it tumbled down the hill. His nerves twitched, and he shrank back against the inner wall of the gallery. Was it just an accident or was there somebody there? With his eyes on the white square of light, he felt for his automatic.

Another stone moved. An instant later a vague shape materialised silently in the fog. He hoped desperately that it might be one of the others come to look for him. Then the shape hardened and his hopes crashed. Silhouetted against the light was a figure that resembled none of them. He recognised it. It was the man in the blue jersey.

The man stared at the hole. He made no sound. He looked long and steadfastly to the right, then to the left, listening. Then his eyes returned to the hole. He stared at it for so long that Ginger felt his nerves tingling under the strain. He dared hardly breathe. Surely the man must hear the pounding of his

heart! The man seemed to be staring straight at him. Was he looking at him? Commonsense said no, or he would not continue to stare. Then what was he looking at?

It dawned on Ginger that the man was staring because he was puzzled. He was wondering if the rocks had fallen down of their own accord. He prayed fervently that he would come to that conclusion.

The man turned, so silently that he might have been a shadow, and stared in the direction of the bay, although the fog would prevent him from actually seeing it. Ginger could tell from his attitude that he was listening. Then he turned back to the square hole in the rock. Again he listened. He listened for so long that Ginger felt he couldn't stand much more of it.

He realised, of course, why the man was listening. He was listening for a sound that would tell him someone was inside. Ginger almost ceased to breathe. The strain was awful. He became angry with himself for the effect it was having on him. He could have ended it there and then, of course, by shooting the man as he stood against the light only a few yards away, but such an act was unthinkable. It would be too much like murder and he never seriously considered it.

Then, suddenly, and still soundlessly, the figure vanished.

Ginger did not move. Was the man still there, standing in the fog? Had he gone? No sound came to answer the question. But presently, as Ginger stood there tense, listening, there came one that brought him near to panic. It was a voice calling. Marcel's voice. He seemed to be not far away. Certainly he was much nearer than the bay. The inference was plain. Marcel was on his way up the hill to ascertain the reason for his long absence. And if that was so, he was walking into what might well turn out to be a death trap. The man in the blue jersey had heard him coming. That was why he had moved away so suddenly. Where was he? No matter where he was, decided Ginger, Marcel must not be allowed to come nearer.

Again came the hail, muffled by the fog. "Allo there! Ginger, where are you?"

Ginger thought swiftly. The significance of a man calling somebody would not be lost on the Russian, unless he were a fool, which was not a thing to reckon on. He would know, now, that the demolished embrasure was no accident. He would know, as definitely as if he had been told, that either somebody was inside the gallery or had been inside.

Taking a firm grip on his automatic, Ginger began to move forward, inch by inch, foot by foot. But if his movements were slow his nerves were racing at full stretch. A last short step took him to the opening. With infinite caution he moved his body forward until he could see round the edge of the rock. Simultaneously came a shout from Marcel, alarmingly close. But the fog still shrouded everything and he could not be seen.

A movement caught Ginger's eye. It was only slight, but it was enough. He made out the burly figure of the bearded man crouching behind a massive

boulder about a dozen yards away. Very slowly he was raising his right arm. In the hand was a heavy revolver. He was peering in the direction from which the last hail had come, which meant that his back was turned to the embrasure, a circumstance that suited Ginger very well.

Marcel's footsteps could be heard now, approaching, stopping, and coming on again. A loose rock rattled. The man behind the rock did not move. There was no need. He had only to wait.

Ginger raised his automatic and covered the crouching figure. Then in a shrill voice he shouted: "Keep back, Marcel! There's a man here with a gun."

Before the last words had left his lips the picture sprang to life. With a grunt of surprise the waiting man sprang up, whirled round and fired. It was a panic shot, for it was unlikely that he actually saw Ginger, who had not exposed himself. He may have fired at the sound. Anyway, the bullet smacked harmlessly against the face of the rock. Ginger returned the shot just as the man leapt forward into the fog, so whether or not he had hit him he did not know. Nor did he know what was happening, although clattering rocks told him that someone was moving.

Feeling that to go out would be folly, he remained where he was. Marcel had been warned. There was nothing more to be done for the moment. The risk of them shooting each other in the blinding fog was great.

Then, as he waited, the heavy revolver roared again, to be followed a split second later by the whip-like crack of Marcel's little police automatic.

Ginger began to creep forward, hugging the rock face, but he had only just started when there was a great crashing of rolling stones and rocks. "Marcel!" he yelled, throwing caution to the winds in his anxiety. "Are you all right?"

He gasped his relief when Marcel's voice came back. "Yes. Come here!"

Feeling his way forward Ginger came upon Marcel standing on the lip of a steep slope that fell away into the mist, and, if the noise of waves was any indication, into the sea. He was staring down.

"Where is he?" asked Ginger breathlessly.

Marcel shrugged and pointed down the slope. "*Voilà.*"

"Did you shoot him?"

"I cannot tell. I tried. After he shoots at me, I shoot back and he jumps and falls into the fog. What happens after that I do not know. All I hear is the stones falling down the hill."

"He didn't hit you?"

"But no. He cannot shoot well, that one, or I must be a dead man now. Name of a dog! What an affair! What happens here? Why are you so long? Algy gets angry. We are worried."

"*You* are worried," returned Ginger grimly. "I was the one to be worried. Come and have a look at this."

He took Marcel to the broken embrasure and pointed to the gun. "What d'you know about that?"

Marcel's dark eyes saucered. "Name of ten thousand devils!" he gasped.

“There are more inside,” Ginger told him.

“And this is France!” expostulated Marcel with high indignation. “Who dares to make a fortress on the soil of France? We shall show them they cannot do this,” he concluded furiously.

“They’ve done it,” Ginger pointed out, practically.

Bertie’s voice could now be heard through the fog. “Here! I say, you chaps, what’s going on up there?”

“Come and look,” Ginger called back.

Presently, guided by their voices, Bertie joined them. He looked at the gun. He put his monocle more firmly in his eye and looked again. “By Jove!” he exclaimed. “That certainly *is* something. What a bally nerve! Who was shooting at who?”

Ginger told him.

“Where did this impudent fellow go?”

“Marcel says he fell down the hill.”

“Served him right. Was he dead?”

“I don’t know, and I’m certainly not going to break my neck climbing down to find out.”

“Quite right, old boy,” agreed Bertie. “Too jolly dangerous.”

“Look, we’d better be getting back,” suggested Ginger with sudden urgency. “It’s time Algy knew about this set up.”

“He was browned off with you being away so long.”

“What’s happening down there?”

“You were right about that beastly iceberg,” said Bertie. “We saw it after you’d gone. Big feller. Drifting smack across the front of us.”

“How’s the machine?”

“Good as new, Algy says. He came ashore in the dinghy. Wanted to know what you were up to. I told him Marcel had gone to find out. When the shooting started he sent me along to see what was happening.”

“He’ll get a surprise when we tell him,” stated Ginger.

They strode on down the hill.

MARCEL TAKES CHARGE

THEY found Algy waiting impatiently at the bay, where the dinghy had been pulled up. The aircraft was riding comfortably a short distance out.

"What the deuce has been going on up there?" he demanded with some asperity.

"Hold your hat while I tell you," answered Ginger. "You'd never guess."

He went on to tell of his discovery on the hill and what had happened subsequently.

Algy did not seem particularly surprised, and when Ginger asked him why, he said: "Why should we be surprised? Something of the sort was suspected. That was why we were sent out on this job. Biggles asked us to explore the island while he was away, and had we done that we should probably have found the thing anyway. As it was we never got started. Far from doing any exploring we've spent our time flapping from one jam to another. Now we have at least got something to show for our trouble."

"Okay," conceded Ginger, somewhat disappointed by this prosaic reception of his news. "What are you going to do about these guns?"

"I'm not going to do anything about them," declared Algy, after considering the matter. "Our experts—or rather the French authorities—may want to see them just as they are. We know they're there. That's all that matters. I'm not lugging them home with me. We've been fiddling about here too long as it is. I'm all for getting away before we bump into more trouble. With any reasonable luck we should have been away by now. We ought to manage it tomorrow. Late as it is, fog or no fog, mines or no mines, I'd still have a shot at it today if it wasn't for that confounded ice in the offing. Sick as I am of the sight of this place, I'm taking no chances of barging into a berg. You were right about that big one. Good thing you spotted it. We don't know how much of the stuff there is about, and until this fog lifts we're not likely to know. This south wind must have brought it along."

"What about Biggles?" queried Ginger. "He may roll up tomorrow. If the fog clears, he'll see the ice, but he won't know about the mine."

"I know," muttered Algy anxiously. "That's my biggest worry. If it's possible, and this is in fact what I'm hoping, I shall get off before he touches down. There would then be no need for him to land. It's the ice that scares me more than anything. I believe I could miss the mines, even supposing there are more there. What I mean is, I know exactly the line I took when I came in. I'd take the same line out. It's hardly likely there would be two mines in the same place. Had there been a second mine anywhere near I feel that the one I set off would have exploded it. Not knowing much about these things I couldn't be sure of that, though."

“So what do we do?” asked Ginger.

“There seems to be nothing more we can do for the time being so I suggest we go aboard and have something to eat while we can see what we’re doing. It’ll be dark presently and I’d rather not show any lights. We’d better mount a guard. There’s a chance that ice may drift into the bay. I don’t mind telling you that I’ve reached the stage when I’m wondering all the time what’s going to happen next. This confounded place would get anyone cheesed. Let’s get aboard.”

An hour later, after darkness had fallen, another change in the weather became apparent. The breeze died away completely and the sea fell to a dead calm. The thermometer dropped nearly to freezing point and the fog dispersed like magic to reveal a sky glittering with stars.

That’s better, thought Ginger, who was on guard in the forward turret.

It was just before he was due to be relieved that he saw the light. At first he took it to be a bright star low over the horizon; but when it started winking dots and dashes he knew that a craft of some sort was there. He lost no time reporting the matter to Algy, who was soon gazing at the distant spark.

“I suppose it couldn’t by any chance be Biggles?” suggested Ginger. “Had he risked a night flight he might just have got here.”

“Not a hope. He would have come right in.”

“Not if he saw the ice.”

“The first thing he’d do would be to fly low over the island to look for a signal from us if we were here. Now the weather is clear he’d fly low to let us know he was about, anyway. There’s one thing certain. That ship, and it must be a ship, is signalling to the island. Only one ship would be likely to do that, or have any reason to do it, and that’s the submarine; or possibly a whaler or some other craft from which it gets its fuel. Nobody else would expect anyone to be on the island. Keep still and let’s see if we can get the message.”

“No. It’s no use,” resumed Algy, after a little while. “Either it’s in code or in Russian—the same thing as far as we’re concerned. It looks to me as if we were too late to stop that fellow contacting the sub by radio, with the result that the confounded thing has come back. If that’s the answer things are going to get even more complicated. Good thing we weren’t showing lights. That would have told them we were here, which might have been very awkward indeed, bearing in mind they have guns.”

“I’ll tell you what it looks like to me,” said Ginger thoughtfully. “The commander of the sub, assuming that’s what it is, is puzzled. In the first place, not knowing that we wrecked the radio, he must wonder why it went dead. Now he’s close enough for visual signals, and he still can’t make contact, more than ever he’ll be wondering why.”

“Yes, that makes sense to me,” agreed Algy. “But it won’t take him long to work out the only possible answer short of an accident. He’ll know something has happened here, to account for his caretaker-fellow not being on duty.”

“He’ll come along to find out what’s wrong.”

"I fancy he'd have done that already had he been able to. In fact, he was probably on his way when the ice made him change his mind. Loose ice is just as big a danger to him as it is to us—bigger, perhaps, since he has to stay in it. My guess is he won't come any nearer until he can see what he's doing. He may creep in a bit, but he'll wait for daylight before he puts on any speed."

"What are we going to do about it?"

"You tell me," requested Algy wearily. "How can we do anything at all? We daren't leave now even if we could; it's getting too close to the time when Biggles might arrive. I don't think it's likely that he'll start before dawn; but he might. You never know with Biggles. Suppose we did manage to get off and started for home, and then missed him on his way out. What a mess he'd be in when he got here—ice on the water, mines under it, a submarine in the offing and no sign of us. He'd try to do something, of course, and probably lose his life doing it. No. I daren't risk that. Time's too short. All we can do now is hang on, anyway until daylight."

The distant light disappeared.

"They've packed up," surmised Ginger. "They've realised it's no use."

"That's about it," agreed Algy.

Bertie appeared behind them. "What's the drill after all that?"

"Just carry on as we are until we can see what we're doing," Algy told him. "Whoever is on guard will have to keep wide awake. There's a submarine to watch for now, as well as ice."

"How very difficult everything is," sighed Bertie.

"It may be worse yet," returned Algy lugubriously.

"Things always seem to be most difficult when Biggles isn't around," observed Ginger.

"So what? It's no use moaning about it," concluded Algy curtly. "Those not on duty can snatch some sleep if they feel like it."

The party dispersed, leaving Marcel on guard.

None of them got much sleep. Algy, with the responsibility of being in charge, had too much on his mind. The cold, no doubt resulting from the proximity of icebergs, was intense. Ginger, lying in the dark, imagining all sorts of unpleasant possibilities, as so easily happens in the small hours, thought the dawn would never come. If the fog returned they would remain grounded. If the weather remained clear the submarine would see them, and probably shell them. Either way, it seemed to him, the situation looked ugly.

As it happened, the dawn broke crystal-clear. It revealed several small bergs in the vicinity, but nothing else. There was no sign of the vessel that had shown the light, although they realised, of course, that if it was the submarine it would be low in the water. They themselves, from water level, had only a limited view. They could only hope that as they couldn't see it, it would be unable to see them—supposing it was still in the region. There was no time, and really no need, for anyone to go ashore in order to try to locate it from high ground. For even before the rim of the sun had showed above the horizon

Algy had made his decision and everyone was busy.

They would, he resolved, take off before the submarine, which might still be about, could become aware of their presence. He would risk the minefield by going out on the line by which he had entered. In the circumstances it was agreed that this was a justifiable risk. Once in the air, as the sea was calm, they would simply move to a safer anchorage, or if necessary sit on the open sea, and wait there until they heard Biggles coming. Assuming that he would take off at the first streak of light, and they were confident that he would do that, they could work out his estimated time of arrival to a matter of minutes. If he did not turn up within the margin of an hour, they would take off and head for home, watching for him and trying the air for radio contact. All agreed that this was a sound and reasonable proposition.

Algy had actually gone through to the control room with Ginger with the object of putting the plan into operation immediately, when from the left of the two headlands that formed the bay, which had of course hidden what was behind it, appeared a slowly-drifting mass of ice some thirty to forty feet high at its peak. The extent of it could not be judged, as this was still behind the rock. By luck which Ginger thought was absolutely brutal, the ice was drifting across the very line of the proposed take-off.

Algy sat back. When he spoke all hope had vanished from his voice. "I give up," he said. "It's no use."

It did seem, Ginger thought, as if they were being pursued by some malevolent fate. "All we can do is wait until it has gone past," he averred, unnecessarily, since it was obvious that they couldn't take off while the thing was there, straight in front of them. "There is this about it," he added, clutching at any straw of hope in this fresh sea of trouble. "The sub, or whatever we saw out there, won't be able to see us through that ice even if it comes in close, and—"

"I call that pretty cold comfort," broke in Algy petulantly. "What you're saying is, we're likely to have to face only one horror at a time."

"While the ice blocks the bay the sub can't get into it," concluded Ginger imperturbably.

"And we can't get out of it. So we can just sit here and bite our fingernails until that infernal berg is considerate enough to move off. It's taking its time about it. We look like being here for an hour or more."

Bertie came forward. "I say, chaps, that's a bit tough!" he exclaimed, looking at the berg. "I call that pretty low. Would you believe it!"

"I'd believe anything," Algy told him despondently. "Whoever named this place Deliverance Bay must have had a warped sense of humour. Frustration Bay would be more like it."

"We shall just have to sit here, laddie, until it goes past."

"As the alternative would be to hurl ourselves into the middle of it, you're probably right," stated Algy with caustic sarcasm.

"No use brooding, old boy, no use at all," said Bertie comfortingly. "How

about me brewing a dish of tea while we're waiting?"

"Okay. Go ahead with the brewing," Algy told him without enthusiasm.

Bertie retired, whistling a ditty.

Thereafter, Algy and Ginger merely sat gazing helplessly at the berg as it crawled at a snail's pace across the entrance to the bay. Indeed, although he did not say so, there were times when Ginger thought the thing was not moving at all. It might get stuck there, he pondered morosely. He knew that only about one tenth of an iceberg showed above water. If the berg was thirty feet high, and he reckoned it was not less than that at its highest point, then there was getting on for three hundred feet of it that could not be seen. Which meant that if the water did not reach that depth, the ice would be dragging on the bottom and might well get stuck. It was such an awful thought that he dismissed it from his mind. Fixing his eyes on the end of the promontory, he saw that the ice was moving, but only just.

"I'm afraid we're going to be here for some time," he told Algy.

"I'd already worked that out."

"No use getting snooty about it."

"Sorry, but the thing's getting on my nerves."

"That's the trouble about having nothing to do. How about me pushing out the dinghy, and trying to spot the sub, if it's there, from high ground?"

"You might as well. Don't be long, though."

Ginger went through to the cabin. "I'm going ashore to see what snags there are on the far side of the ice," he announced. "Any more for the Skylark?"

"I'll come with you," offered Bertie.

The dinghy was soon out and paddled quickly to the landing-slip.

Leaving Bertie with it Ginger ran up the rising ground, occasionally taking backward glances seaward to check if he was high enough for his purpose. As soon as he found he was far enough up to see beyond the berg that blocked the view below, he stopped, and gazed out across a dead calm sea that was now almost entirely free from ice. By an ironical twist of fate the berg that had held them up was the only one of any size. Of the submarine, or any other craft, there was no sign; and he was about to shout the information to Bertie, who was watching him, when he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. Turning quickly he was just in time to see the stern of the submarine disappearing behind, and not far beyond, the right hand promontory. In an instant he was racing back to the dinghy.

Bertie, seeing him coming and sensing urgency, was ready and waiting. He sent the dinghy ploughing back to the aircraft.

"The submarine's there," Ginger told them all, pointing. "She's fairly close in, too. I think she must be going to land a party to find out what's happened."

"Where is she exactly?" asked Algy.

Ginger told him.

"Then it rather looks as if she's making for the hut, or the nearest place to

it where people can get ashore.”

“With the sea so tranquil, she could land men anywhere,” declared Marcel.

“As they can’t get into the bay they’ll naturally land as near the hut as possible to find out what has happened to their man,” opined Bertie.

Ginger looked at the iceberg that had been the cause of the trouble. The tail end of it was just clearing the promontory—at any rate the part that showed above water. The gap was still a narrow one; a matter of feet; nothing like wide enough for the machine to get through. He reckoned that at the berg’s present rate of progress it would be half an hour at least before they could get out. Even that was not to be relied on, for a fresh current, or the tide, or a breeze if it arose, could cause the thing to change direction.

Marcel spoke. “When these men get to the hut, if that is where they go, and they see no man there, they will think fast.”

“When they see the smashed radio aerial they’ll get cracking to find out who did it,” put in Ginger.

Marcel shrugged his expressive shoulders. “Then we must do some cracking, too, I think.”

“Where are we going to crack to?” growled Algy. “If we try to get out of the bay we’re likely to crack everything to some order.” He looked at his watch. “Another hour may see Biggles here. That’ll just about put the lid on everything.”

Ginger clapped a hand to his head. “What’s the matter with us?” he cried. “We can do plenty of cracking—and how!”

Everyone looked at him.

“All right—and how?” inquired Algy critically. “You tell us.”

“With guns,” proceeded Ginger. “There are enough guns in that arsenal I found to repel a major invasion—not only rockets and heavy stuff but machine-guns. I believe the machine-guns were put there for this very job—I mean, to prevent a landing on the island—if there was a war. Okay, the war has started. They shot at us. Now we can use their own guns to shoot at them.”

The others stared at him.

Bertie broke the spell. “I say, chaps, that is something. Hoist the blighters with their own beastly petard, as old Willie Shakespeare used to say.”

“Are you suggesting that we start something that may end in total war?” inquired Algy cynically. “Have a heart!”

“We might as well go out with a bang as sit here and be shot to bits when these stiff find us, because that’s what’s going to happen,” argued Ginger.

“Absolutely,” confirmed Bertie, polishing his eyeglass. “Absolutely, couldn’t agree more.”

Ginger warmed up to his subject. “We can prevent them from landing,” he declared. “We can make them keep at a distance. We might even make them submerge. What can they do about it? Shoot back and knock all their hard work to pieces? Not on your life. That would be a joke.”

"I don't see anything funny about it," returned Algy coldly. "I don't want my name to go down in history as the man who started the Third World War."

"The only thing your name will go down on, if we stand here nattering much longer, is a tombstone," replied Ginger firmly.

Bertie looked at Algy. His expression was serious. "Ginger's right, old boy. If these thugs get ashore we've had it; and Biggles too, probably. If they don't knock us off it'll be hard labour in Siberia for us, for the rest of our naturals. Our only hope is to stop them from getting on the island. Of course, it's up to you, but that's how it looks to me."

Marcel stepped in. "No. It is up to me," he contended vehemently. "This is France. It is my duty to prevent invasion on French soil. These communists land everywhere, but here only over my dead body. I will raise the flag. If they shoot on that, they make the war, not us. Do you fight with me, or do I fight alone?" From his notebook he took a tiny French flag and held it aloft. "*Voilà. Le Drapeau. Vive la France!*" he saluted.

"That's the stuff!" cried Bertie. "Legally Marcel is right," he told Algy. "This is as much a part of France as France itself. We're foreigners. We've no say in the matter."

"Okay, have it your own way," agreed Algy. "I suppose we might as well be shot here for trying to stop a war as go home and be shot for starting one. We get the dirty end of the stick either way."

"If we're going we'd better get cracking or we shall be too late," asserted Ginger.

"Always the cracking," said Marcel. "*Bon.* Let us make the crack, *tout-de-suite.*"

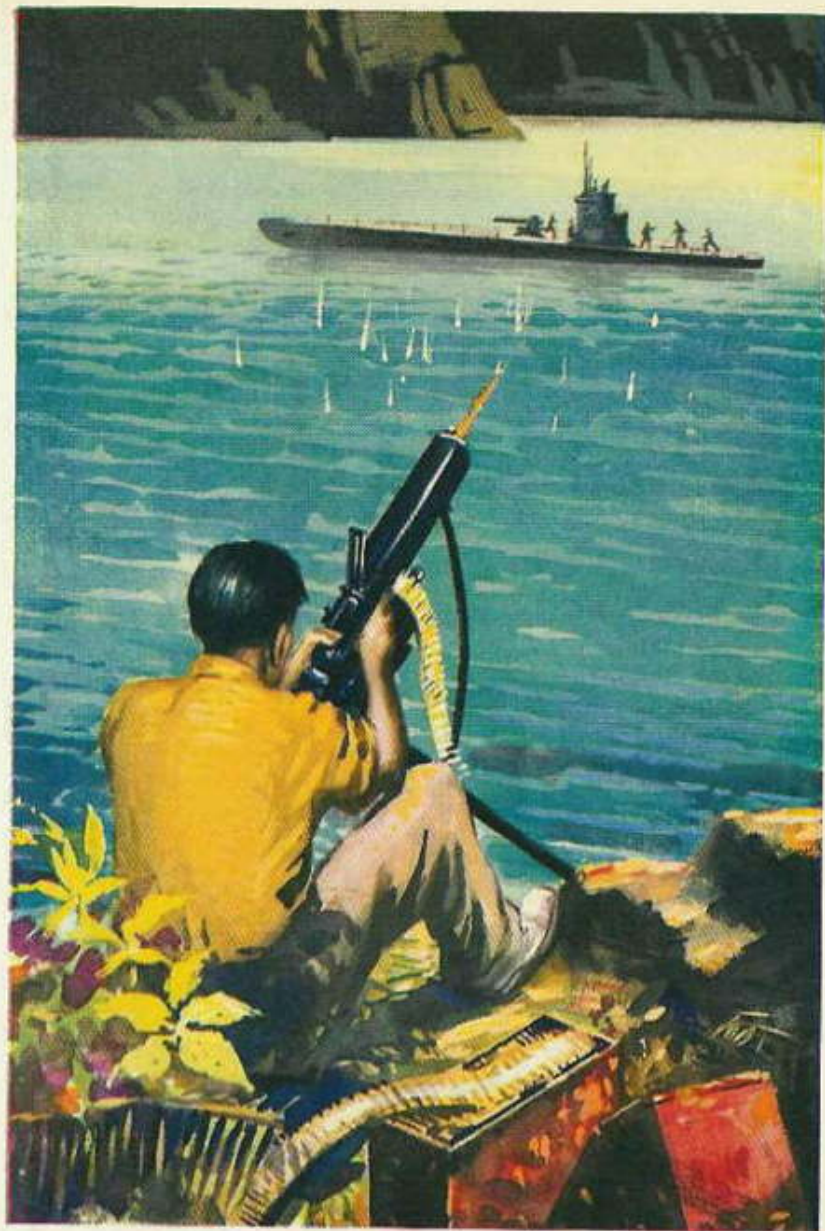
They all set off at a run.

Before they reached the gallery they could see the submarine, apparently feeling its way carefully towards the rocky coast. There were several men on deck. Ginger led the way to the entrance he had made and hurrying along the passage stopped at the first machine-gun. Without much difficulty he pushed out the protective dry-stone wall in front of it, exposing the target in plain view.

Marcel seated himself behind the greasy Mauser. "I know this beast," he announced. "I met him in the war." He opened the lid of an ammunition box and, pulling out the belt, loaded the gun.

"*Regardez!*" he cried, with intense satisfaction.

Just what he intended to do he did not say; nor did the others ask him. He wasted no time showing them. Before anyone was prepared for it—and that included Marcel, Ginger thought—the gun was streaming a shower of lead. Apparently Marcel had failed to take a firm holding, for the bullets went all over the place, most of them flicking the water well in front of the submarine. The effect on those on deck was instantaneous. There was a rush for the conning tower.



There was a rush for the conning tower
(See page 149)

“Bad!” murmured Marcel. Profiting from his trial, he took a firmer grip with the obvious intention of carrying on with the work.

“Take it easy!” said Algy anxiously.

Marcel fired another burst and this time did better. At any rate, bullets could be heard smacking on metal.

“*Bien!*” murmured Marcel, and repeated the dose. This time he held his thumb down for so long that Algy warned him to go steady with the ammunition.

“*Zut!*” answered Marcel. “There is plenty and we do not have to buy it,” he declared recklessly, and carried on.

The air was filled with the reek of cordite and burning oil. The water jacket of the gun was smoking. Ginger put his hand near it and drew it back quickly. “She’s nearly red hot,” he announced. “There’s no water in the jacket. You’ll burn the gun out.”

“It is not our gun,” was all Marcel had to say to that.

There was no answering fire from the submarine, which by this time was turning away, gathering speed.

“I told you,” claimed Ginger. “They’re not going to shoot their own guns to bits.” He looked at the rockets. “Pity we don’t know how to work them,” he said regretfully.

“Don’t you start fiddling with those things,” ordered Algy curtly.

They stood watching the submarine. It did not submerge, but travelling awash picked up speed as it retired.

“Hold your fire,” Algy told Marcel. “You’ve done enough. They’ve changed their minds about landing. You’ve given them something to think about.”

“Yes, by Jove,” said Bertie. “I’d like to hear what’s going on inside that beastly sardine tin. Let ‘em work that one out. Jolly good show, Marcel.”

“Yes, he seems to have settled the argument for the moment, but let’s not crow too soon,” said Algy cautiously. “I’m all for leaving well alone.” He looked down at the iceberg that had delayed their departure. “There’ll soon be room for us to get through. Let’s go down and get ready to move off before any more snags crop up.”

As they left the gallery and hurried on down the bill towards the bay it did seem to Ginger that the end of their troubles was in sight. Nothing that he could think of could stop them now. But within a minute he realised that he had forgotten one thing.

“Hark!” he exclaimed, skidding to a stop.

They all pulled up.

Softly through the still air came the hum of a gliding aircraft.

Ginger pointed. “There he is! It’s a Sunderland. It’s Biggles!”

“Yes, by Jove, and he’s coming in,” cried Bertie. “What about the mine?”

Algy let out a groan.

With one accord they pelted on down the hill

OUT WITH A BANG

WHETHER or not Biggles had seen them, or the submarine, they had of course no means of knowing; but he could not have failed to see the ice, or the flying-boat in the bay. This was confirmed by the way he was heading straight for the gap between the promontory and the berg, the exposed part of which was now nearly halfway across the bay.

It was clear to Ginger that there was nothing they could do, whatever happened. It was too late to stop Biggles. Not all the waving in the world would have any effect. He would merely suppose, as Algy had done, that any signals they made were simply a greeting. The last thing that would occur to him was that there was danger in landing in the bay.

There was this about the situation. The berg was now serving a useful purpose in that it covered most of the area suspected of holding mines, thus forcing Biggles to land along the line which, because they had intended to use it themselves, they had come to regard as reasonably safe. They would soon know, thought Ginger. He quite expected the submarine to start shooting, but nothing of the sort happened. Perhaps, with all the excitement, and the fact that the aircraft had arrived gliding, they hadn't noticed it. The submarine's own engines and its passage through the water would drown any slight sound that the aircraft made. But this was conjecture. All that mattered was, so far there had been no gunfire.

The aircraft came on, engines idling and still losing height, straight towards the gap. Another ten seconds, thought Ginger, and the suspense would be over, one way or the other. He held his breath.

Beside him the others were standing rigid, staring, thinking the same thoughts, no doubt.

The keel of the Sunderland touched, slashing a long white feather in the surface of the water and sending bow-waves rippling. Nothing happened. It surged on, fast losing way, and ran smoothly to a standstill. A burst of throttle sent it on again until it was close in. Biggles' head appeared.

"Phew!" gasped Algy. "He's made it. Let's fetch him." He ran down to the dinghy.

Biggles was dropping his anchor. By the time he had done this the dinghy was alongside. The cabin door opened and there stood Biggles, regarding them with askance and a suspicion of annoyance. "What do you fellows think you're up to?" he demanded. "I was ready to write your obituary notices, but I thought I'd better have a look round first."

"You told us to come here," answered Algy.

"I didn't tell you to make an indefinite picnic of it."

"You'd better have the gen before you talk about picnics," returned Algy.

“Things here are all set to boil over. To give you an idea, it may interest you to know that you’ve just landed over a minefield.”

Biggles started. “Are you kidding?”

“There was no kid about the one I exploded. It blew me high and dry.”

“Who did this?”

“Some scallywags in a submarine. It’s still about, so something may start at any moment. Ten minutes ago the crew tried a landing, but we beat ‘em off with machine-guns.”

Biggles stared. “Where did you get the guns?”

“Right here. This rock is a young Gibraltar. It’s no place to stand nattering. Let’s get out before some big stuff starts coming over.”

“Wait a minute. I must get this clear. Are you telling me that this island is an armed depot?”

Algy pointed to the Dog’s Head. “That rock is hollow. There’s a gallery stiff with guns of all sorts.”

“I must look at this,” declared Biggles.

“You can take my word for it. I’ll tell you all about it when we get home. Don’t you understand there’s a submarine hanging about? We’ve had a tough time. Why do you suppose we’re still here?”

“I didn’t see the submarine.”

“Then it must have submerged. It can’t be far away.”

“If we go they may come ashore and dismantle everything.”

“Okay. Go and look. But I’m telling you, this place is red hot.” In as few words as possible Algy narrated the events of the past two days.

Biggles’ eyes opened wide as he listened. “By thunder! You have had a time,” he admitted. “We’ll push off. But first I must have a look at this gunnery outfit. It shouldn’t take more than a minute or two.”

“Ginger can take you up the hill,” suggested Algy. “The rest of us will stay here and have the machines ready for a snappy take-off. I’ve a feeling that we shall have to make one.”

“Fair enough. Let’s go.”

Leaving the others with the two machines Ginger paddled Biggles ashore and set off up the Dog’s Head at the fastest speed possible. On the way Ginger described how he had made his discovery.

Reaching the objective they first looked at the sea, but could see no sign of the submarine.

“She must have gone,” said Biggles.

“Sitting on the bottom, more likely,” replied Ginger. “Come on.”

Biggles whistled when he saw what was inside the gallery. He took out his pocketbook, made a quick sketch map and jotted down some notes. “We might as well get our facts right while we are here,” he remarked. “I think that’s the lot.” He closed his book. “Let’s get weaving.”

They hurried out, and reaching the open saw the submarine surfacing about half a mile beyond the right hand promontory, heading in a direction that

would give it a view inside the bay.

"There she is!" cried Ginger. "She's got teeth, and if she sees us she'll use them."

"Run for it!" snapped Biggles.

They raced down the hill.

Those aboard the aircraft must have seen them coming and guessed what had happened, for by the time Biggles and Ginger had reached the bay the engines of both machines had been started. Biggles grabbed the paddle. Neither spoke. The danger was apparent. Both were aware of what was now certain to happen, and there was no need to talk about it.

They reached the nearer of the two machines just as the nose of the submarine came slowly round the end of the promontory. It was still about half a mile away. Not, as Ginger realised, there was any need for it to come nearer. For the heavy armament it carried the range was short. Men were busy on deck and it could only be a matter of seconds before the guns opened up.

Bang! A gun flashed and a shell screamed overhead to burst in a shower of broken rock just beyond the slipway.

"Leave the dinghy!" shouted Biggles.

Coming alongside Ginger jumped for the cabin. Marcel, who was waiting, pulled him in. He heard Biggles shout to Algy in the other machine. "Get off! Don't wait!" Then Biggles leapt aboard and dashed forward. As Marcel slammed the door Ginger went after him. Through the side window of the control cabin the first thing he saw was Algy's machine streaking for the open sea. As it tore on the submarine came into view, and from the activity on her deck it was obviously going to be a close thing. In fact, Ginger doubted if they would get off.

Just what happened during the next minute or two he was not sure, for his view was partly obscured by flying spray. The submarine seemed to be turning slowly, presumably to bring its full armament to bear. Tracer shells streamed from a gun to make a white line across Algy's tail.

Biggles lifted his machine off the water. A machine-gun came into action. Some bullets struck the Sunderland. Ginger saw the gun that had been firing at Algy swing round to cover them, and he thought, "This is it."

It was, but not as he had imagined.

With his eyes still on the submarine he saw a sheet of flame hurl a pillar of water high into the air. A strangled cry left his lips and he clutched at the side of the cockpit to brace himself, knowing that the blast must hit them; which it did, lifting the big machine as if it had been a scrap of paper. All he could think was: "Bertie was right." The scour of the rip tide must have shifted the mines, and the submarine had run foul of one of its own weapons. As soon as he felt that Biggles had regained control of the aircraft he looked out. The nose of the submarine, at right angles to the water and sliding down, was just disappearing. A tidal wave was leaping towards the slipway. Behind it a great flat patch of oil was spreading over the dark water.

But both machines were in the air now, together, Algy taking up formation behind Biggles. Twice they circled low, looking for survivors from the submarine, but the vessel must have been blown in halves and they saw none. In fact, but for the evil-looking oil stains there was nothing to show that, a minute or two before, a vessel had been there.

Biggles turned away.

“Are you going to land?” Ginger asked him.

“No,” answered Biggles. “From our point of view, that’s probably the best thing that could have happened.”

“In what way?”

“Well, it’ll be some time before the people who sent the submarine here will realise that it isn’t coming back, and that should give our people plenty of time to come out and have a look at this set-up. No doubt the same sort of thing has been going on elsewhere. When the enemy realises that his game is rumbled he’ll probably pack up. Meanwhile, we’ll get home.”

Biggles set a course for Cape Town.

The action taken by the Higher Authorities was much as Biggles had predicted, although he, having made his report to the Air-Commodore, took no further active part in the affair. He attended several Security meetings at high level. After that there was silence, and it was only after some time had passed that the Air-Commodore told him confidentially the upshot of the investigations.

A joint British and French Naval Mission, accompanied by Marcel as guide, went to Hog Island, where everything was found just as it had been left. The guns were removed and the gallery blown up by French engineers, from which it may be supposed that the lonely island has reverted to its former purpose of providing a home for gulls, seals and penguins. The island being a French possession, the matter was of course left to their jurisdiction.

Biggles gathered from what the Air-Commodore said that the nations of all the Western Powers owning islands anywhere had undertaken to make a thorough search in case the liberties taken with the Crozets had been repeated elsewhere. The Chilean government was tipped off about the likelihood of trespassers in the Magellen Straits. Whether they, or anyone else, ever found anything, Biggles never knew. Security silence was clamped on tight and not a word of the plot reached the newspapers.

Marcel, at a later date, told them of one suspicious incident. A Russian whaler was seen working towards the Crozets, but finding itself shadowed by a French destroyer altered course and returned to the area allocated for whale hunting by the International Commission which exists for that purpose.

All this suited Biggles and his comrades, who agreed that they wouldn’t care if they never saw the South Indian Ocean again.

The Hydrographic Office put Algy’s lake on the naval charts, and accepted his name for it—Lake Desolate.

In conclusion it may be said that the unlucky Cockney castaway, Alf Robinson, on whose tragic experience so much had depended, recovered from his injuries, and later, changing his mind about the sea, joined the Royal Navy.

THE END